

Climate change threatens children's health

The World Health Organisation has stated that climate change is a significant and emerging threat to public health, and changes the way we must look at protecting vulnerable populations.

It is estimated globally that climate change is already causing the deaths of 400,000 people each year and 88 percent of the illnesses and injuries caused by climate change occur in children under the age of five.

Children are the most vulnerable population to the effects of climate change already affecting the world for their behaviour exposes them to increased risks, their bodies respond differently to harm, and they are dependent on others.

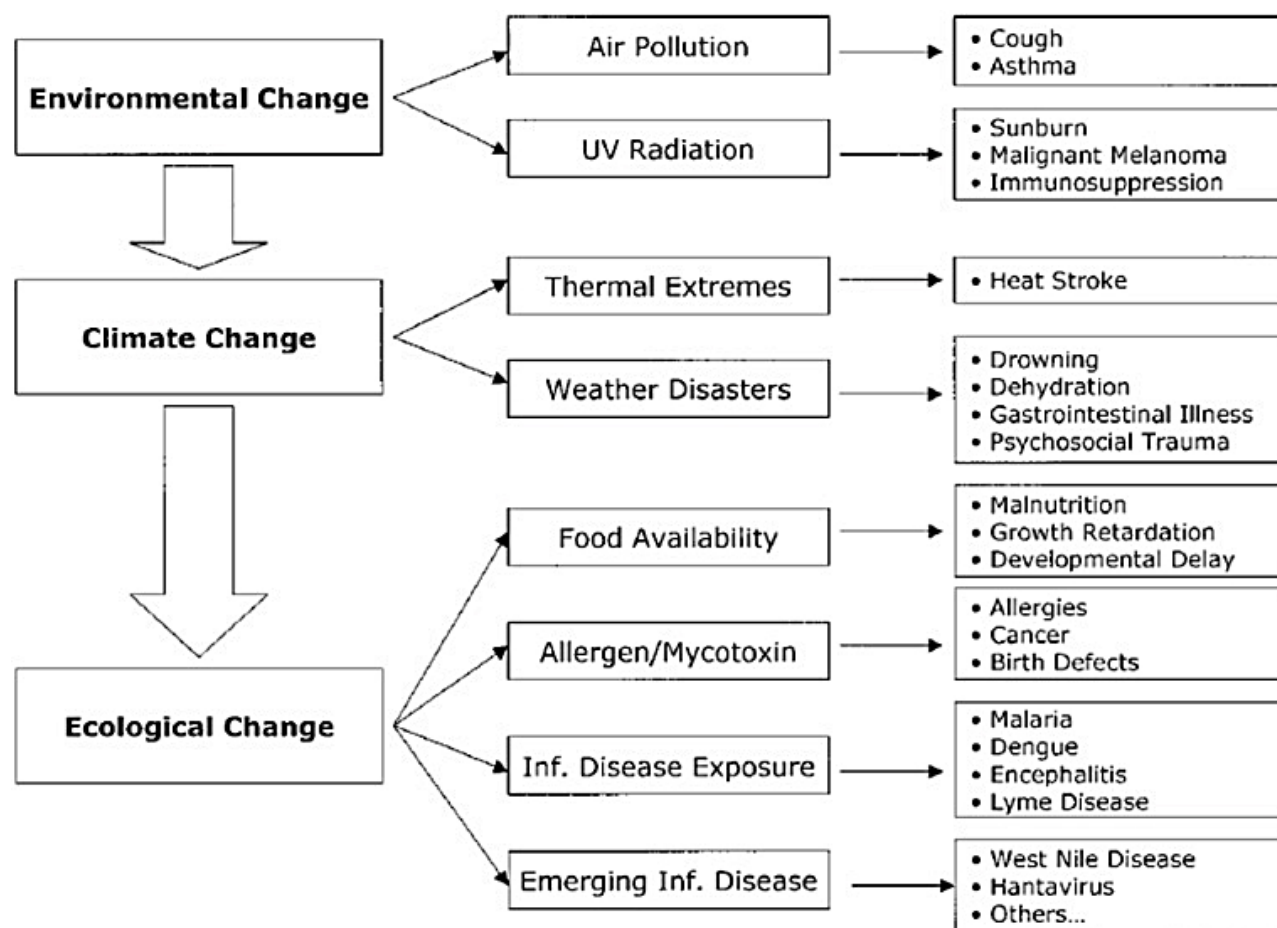


Fig. 1.

Children drink, eat and breathe more for their body weight compared to adults, and their immature

physiology and metabolism increases their risk in heat waves, water shortage and contamination, malnutrition and air pollution. Their immature immune systems make them more vulnerable to many infections. Consequently children have an increase in attendances to emergency departments for diseases such as asthma, fever, gastroenteritis, and electrolyte imbalances.

Rapid growth and development in the womb and in childhood means exposure to harmful situations such as maternal and/or childhood malnutrition, or exposure to air pollutants leading to chronic asthma can have ongoing, severe and long-term effects into adult life. There is evidence that exposure to extreme heat during pregnancy may cause premature birth.

The behaviour of children predisposes them to the effects of climate change and they lack many mechanisms to protect themselves; they more frequently put things into their mouths, increasing chances of infection. They tend to spend more time outdoors thereby exposing themselves to hazards such as dehydration and sunburn.

Climate change affects children's mental health. Mental and emotional distress is seen in children and adolescents following weather disasters and the child may suffer post-traumatic stress disorder and higher rates of sleep disturbance, aggressive behaviour, sadness, and substance abuse.

Many parts of the world are experiencing increasing frequency and severity of flooding which may have comprehensive health effects on children, including drowning and near-drowning, injury, hypothermia or electrocution. Dirty water entering homes, yards and playgrounds can also carry diarrhoeal disease, skin infections and a flu-like illness called leptospirosis. In the damp conditions following floods, mould spores proliferate to aggravate allergies and asthma attacks in children.

Doctors recognise that the effects of climate change from the existing one degree centigrade rise in world temperature are already threatening the underlying social, economic and environmental supports for a healthy childhood. These effects will be much greater even if the 2 degree target for limitation from the Paris agreement is reached. Unfortunately current political instability and disagreements suggest that the world will become warmer by more than 2 degrees.

Doctors make daily decisions on treatment based on available evidence. In the case of climate change we have more than enough information to act. We therefore must speak up on behalf of our children, who cannot take action themselves, yet whose health will be the most affected. This is an issue of intergenerational justice which is increasingly recognised by young people acting in the Courts against government inaction

Using these imperatives doctors have an important role in convincing governments to take more effective action on climate mitigation and in setting example in greenhouse emission reduction in their personal lives and practice offices. Preparing health services and infrastructure for climate change is essential

If there is one issue upon which we should all agree it is to protect the current and future health of our children and grandchildren.

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