



INSTITUTE OF
HEALTH PROMOTION
AND EDUCATION

IHPE Position Statement: Air pollution

Key information

1. Good air quality is fundamental to our health and well-being.
2. The presence of contaminants in this air can adversely affect people's health and can lead to serious illnesses and premature death. Expert bodies have declared air pollution to be a public health emergency. Air pollution is associated with both outdoor and indoor environments. There is greater awareness of the visible contaminants of air than there is of the invisible ones.
3. Approximately 80% of premature deaths attributable to air pollution are due to strokes and heart disease, 14% to chronic and acute respiratory disease and 6% to lung cancer. The number of health effects associated with air pollution continuing to increase.
4. There are considerable health inequalities associated with air pollution. The health of whole populations is at risk but young children, older people, those with pre-existing conditions and those experiencing social disadvantage are at particular risk.
5. It is important to note that 91% of premature deaths attributable to air pollution occur in low and middle income countries (LMICs).
6. In 2018, the UK, together with five other countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Romania), were referred to Europe's highest court for failing to tackle illegal levels of pollution.
7. More than 80% of people living in those urban areas which monitor air pollution are exposed to levels which exceed WHO limits.
8. Of cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants 97% in LMICs, compared with 49% in high income ones, fail to meet WHO guidelines.
9. Main sources of outdoor pollution are burning of fossil fuels for heating and electricity, diesel exhaust fumes, and industrial sources including waste incineration and agriculture.
10. In many countries, especially LMICs, household pollution is a major concern. Each year approximately 4 million people die prematurely from illnesses attributable to household air pollution. The main cause is inefficient cooking practices using biomass, solid fuels and kerosene in poorly ventilated dwellings. Women and children are particularly affected.
11. Tobacco smoke is an important indoor air pollutant
12. While gains have been made in tackling air pollution, especially in higher income countries, progress is widely seen as too little and too slow.

Statement

Evidence

- Public health interventions for tackling air pollution issues exist and have been proven to be effective.
- By reducing air pollution, countries can reduce the burden of disease from stroke, heart disease, lung cancer, and chronic and acute respiratory diseases, including asthma.
- Air pollution can be effectively tackled through a combination of policy and environmental action supported by health education and preventive and curative health services. Since many sources of outdoor pollution are beyond the control of individuals, policy, legislation and environmental action must receive high priority in securing air improvements.
- Reducing key sources of outdoor pollution requires international and national inter-sectoral policies in order to achieve: cleaner transport, energy-efficient homes; and cleaner power generation, industrial production and waste management.
- Installation of green infrastructure (e.g. hedges) has been found to reduce pollutant concentrations in streets and could be applied to many urban settings.

Governments

- Priority needs to be given to reducing the health inequalities associated with exposure to air pollution and to give particular attention to protecting children and other vulnerable groups.
- Governments should set out clear plans for achieving the WHO air quality standards. Local authorities need to implement and monitor national and local policies and regulations to reduce emissions.
- IHPE recommends that governments increase investment in active transport. Cycling and walking should be promoted by incentives and improved environments
- When government documents on a clean air strategy are put out for consultation IHPE will submit responses where appropriate and encourage others to do so.

Ottawa Charter

- IHPE urges health promoters to take an active role in advocating for international, national and local policies designed to increase the adoption of clean energy sources and to reduce the use of major pollutants. Pressure to ensure that policies are implemented fully and promptly is also required.
- Creating healthy environments is one of the key action areas in the Ottawa Charter. IHPE strongly supports the healthy settings movement and advocates the development of health promoting schools, cities, workplaces and healthcare settings with renewed and full attention given to the element of creating healthy environments.

Healthy schools

- New schools need to be built away from major roads and existing schools should have strong green barriers between schools and busy roads. In working to promote healthy air in their environments IHPE encourages schools to take a whole school approach as part of being designated 'Health Promoting Schools'. Schools are encouraged to engage parents

in order to increase the levels of walking, cycling and use of public transport to reach schools.

- It is expected that all children should learn about air pollution in science or Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) curricula using a spiral curriculum approach. Schools can collaborate in projects to increase tree planting and other greening of the environment actions in their own grounds and in their communities.

Healthy cities

- In creating healthier cities incentives need to be in place to increase use of public transport, provision of cycle paths, the adoption of low polluting vehicles, traffic free shopping and leisure areas, increased tree planting, and maintaining support for parks and green spaces. Where legislation is required to achieve healthier air information and education should be provided in order to build community support.

Healthy workplaces

- Measures to ensure clean air need to be in place and implemented in all indoor and outdoor workplaces. Education to promote the acceptance and full use of protective measure should be in place. In agriculture regulations on crop spraying and stubble burning need to be promoted and implemented.

Hospitals and primary care

- Hospitals should be encouraged to work towards 'smoke-free' status- both indoors and outdoors, together with the provision of evidence-based smoking cessation support. Hospitals in urban situations are encouraged to incorporate more gardens and green spaces. Preventive education is important for at risk groups to reduce onset or worsening of air pollution related respiratory problems.
- Primary care health professionals can advise on avoidance of pollution, especially to parents and those with existing conditions such as asthma. Where facilities are in proximity to busy roads the creation of green barriers is encouraged.
- Training and CPD for health professionals is recommended to update on recent research on air pollution and its health effects.

Public information and education

- There is growing recognition of the problem of air pollution and the wider issue of climate change although further awareness raising is needed and IHPE is committed to playing its part in this.
- Awareness raising is needed on the components of air pollution, the links between air pollution and health, high risk groups, times and situations for air pollution threats to ill health and on measures to promote cleaner air. Education to increase support for pollution reducing measures is important
- IHPE fully recognises the international aspects of the air pollution issue, including indoor household pollution and industrial sources which particularly affect LMICs. It publicises the work of charities and NGOs who are working on these matters and disseminates results of evaluations of the promotion and adoption in households of solar power and lower polluting cooking methods.
- IHPE is committed to sharing information on the issue through Twitter, website, newsletters and journal articles.

References and Further Reading

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Resources

Living Streets: The UK Charity for Everyday Walking. <https://www.livingstreets.org.uk>

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