

Health on Earth: a healthy planet benefits us all – World Health Day 2022



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On this World Health Day, WHO/Europe calls on everyone to come together and recognize the importance of our planet, for the sake of our health and that of the generations to come.

More than 13 million deaths around the world, including 1.4 million in Europe each year, are caused by avoidable environmental factors, WHO estimates. This figure takes into account the accelerating climate crisis, which is the single biggest health threat facing humanity, but also includes air pollution, inadequate sanitation and clean water, exposure to chemicals and radiation, and unsafe urban environments.

Our environment provides the fundamental requirements for life: clean air and water, safe food, and shelter. Nature is both the origin of infectious and vector-borne diseases and the source of medicines, including many antibiotics. Human impact on the environment is increasing the risk of emerging infectious diseases in humans, over 60% of which originate from animals, mainly from wildlife. Reducing biodiversity may also increase disease transmission.

Human activities such as deforestation, trade and consumption of wildlife, and international travel are thought to have led to the emergence of COVID-19 and facilitated its global spread. Plans for post-COVID-19 recovery, and specifically plans to reduce the risk of future epidemics, therefore need to go further upstream than early detection and control of disease outbreaks. They also need to lessen our impact on the environment to reduce the risk at its source. The concept of One Health recognizes this interconnectedness between all people, animals, plants and their shared environment on planet Earth.

“Improving our natural and built environments, where we live, work, learn and play, can bring both immediate and long-term benefits for

our health and well-being. This World Health Day is an opportunity to think how we can create healthier cities and communities, with more green and blue spaces that support active recreation, offer the chance to relax and promote mental health,” said Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe.

“We also need to reduce car dependency, improve public transport, and increase safe walking and cycling,” he added.

In many places, reduced economic and transport activities brought about by measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 resulted in the short term in cleaner air, reduced carbon emissions, less noise and greater safety for cyclists and pedestrians. This is proof that the power is in our hands to improve our environment, and that we can build back better as we recover from the pandemic.

Air pollution is the single most important environmental risk factor to human health. WHO estimates that around 7 million premature deaths every year are due to the effects of air pollution, and more than 500 000 of those deaths occur in the WHO European Region.

This makes air pollution, along with tobacco use, harmful alcohol consumption, unhealthy diets and insufficient physical activity, a leading risk factor for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes. NCDs cause 90% of all deaths in the European Region, but their risk factors can be prevented or controlled with a number of highly effective and low-cost policies and interventions.

Some air pollutants are short-lived climate pollutants, which are linked with both negative health effects and near-term warming of the planet. Thus, almost all efforts to improve air quality will also enhance climate action, and almost all climate change mitigation efforts will in turn improve air quality, with immediate health benefits that greatly amplify the return on investments.

Tobacco use has broad environmental consequences beyond the devastation of tobacco-caused diseases. Tobacco growing destroys trees and damages soil, and tobacco manufacturing produces toxic waste. Its use pollutes the air and the surfaces inside our homes. Cigarette butts and other tobacco waste poison marine life, contaminate beaches and waterways, and foul our urban living spaces.

We can do so much to improve our environments and our health by taking action close to where we live and emphasizing the role of local levels of government. For more than 30 years, the WHO European Healthy Cities Network and the Regions for Health Network have been pioneering drivers of change, creating healthier urban settings that support the well-being of the people and communities that use them.

Within a complex world of multiple tiers of government, numerous sectors working towards similar goals, and many stakeholders involved in the pursuit of health and well-being, cities and regions are uniquely placed to provide leadership. They are showing that global problems can be addressed at a local level.

The Pan-European Commission on Health and Sustainable Development recently recommended the adoption of a One Health policy recognizing the interconnectedness of human, animal and environmental health. The Commission's report calls on policy-makers to draw inspiration from those working to tackle environmental issues in order to set societies on the right track for future generations.

So, let's not only imagine a #HealthierTomorrow – let's make it happen.

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