



# Medical Groups Warn Of Climate Change's Potential Impact on Health

**More asthma, heat waves and microbial disease could result if greenhouse gases aren't curbed**

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Experts from leading U.S. medical groups gathered Thursday to warn of impending dangers to human health if greenhouse gas emissions continue unchecked, speeding climate change.

They believe the federal government, specifically the Environmental Protection Agency, does have the power to curtail such emissions, however.

"The science is unequivocal that global warming is occurring and human activity is the cause of it," Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association said during a press conference Thursday. "We believe the EPA has the potential to significantly reduce the public health burden of climate change and we are committed to protecting the agency's authority over the full breath of its work."

APHA and other groups worry that if Congress restricts the EPA's authority to regulate greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, health problems will rise.

Last week, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a budget that would cut the EPA's budget by a third, the experts noted. Moreover, a funding resolution passed by the new Republican house would block the agency from enacting a new greenhouse emissions rule, according to speakers at the Thursday press conference.

Not everyone agreed with those experts, however.

**Sterling Burnett** is a senior fellow at the Dallas-based **National Center for Policy Analysis**, a nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank focused on free-market approaches to public policy. In an interview, he said the effects of climate change on human health remain in question, as does the wisdom of earmarking EPA funds to fight global warming.

"I don't know if the world is going to be warmer 100 years from now than it is today, but if it is, there are likely to be less deaths from a variety of illnesses overall than more deaths from cardiopulmonary diseases due to the warmth," Burnett said.

Funding the EPA to reduce greenhouse gasses will slow economic growth without improving health, he added. "If what you are concerned about is public health there are much more efficacious ways of responding to the health threats [of] 100 years from now," he said. "So do we, by making the world poorer in the future, buy the decisions we make now on climate change regulations, do we increase the disease burden overall?"

The experts gathered at Thursday's press conference took a different stance.

The AMA's Benjamin said that climate change *is* leading to extreme weather events that endanger the elderly and sick. In addition, increased air pollution can increase asthma and other respiratory diseases, he noted. Climate change also increase the prevalence of airborne and water-borne disease.

Benjamin believes that the Clean Air Act, passed in 1970, has already "made significant improvements in the health and well-being of the American public."

Also speaking at Thursday's press conference was Dr. Cecil Wilson, president of the American Medical Association (AMA). He said he believes that extreme weather conditions are behind dangerous travel conditions in winter and extended heat waves in summer, which have increased in the past two decades.

"Approximately 133 million Americans are living with a chronic condition, such as heart disease or diabetes, which are aggravated by heat waves, increasing the risk for serious complications and death," Wilson said.

In the United States, these severe extended heat waves are causing unnecessary deaths, added Kristie L. Ebi, lead author for the human health chapter of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Assessment Report. The panel, which receives funding from the federal government, issues reports on climate change around the world.

"No one should die in a heat wave," Ebi said.

Climate change has caused other worrying trends, the experts said, including worrying changes in insect migration. "Many states are facing increases in insect-borne illnesses," Wilson pointed out. "For example dengue fever, a condition that has rarely been seen in this country, has appeared in Florida."

Lyme disease has also increased tenfold in the past 10 years, Wilson added.

And the increase in greenhouse gases has increased air pollution, he said. "Over the past three decades, poor air quality has extended the allergy and asthma season, in this country, by about 20 days. Asthma rates have doubled and other respiratory diseases are also on the rise."

Dr. Perry Sheffield, deputy director of the Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit for EPA Region 2, and an assistant professor in the department of pediatrics and the department of preventive medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, noted that reducing air pollution can have immediate health benefits.

"When air pollution was reduced during the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, asthma attacks among children dropped by 44 percent," she said during the press conference.

Burnett agreed that the burden of asthma has increased in the United States, but he doesn't think it has anything to do with climate change or greenhouse gases.

"It's not clear to me that you are going to get it from a warmer world," he said.