

Key messages

- cohealth recognises that climate change is a health emergency.
- Climate change is already having alarming impacts on people's physical and mental health. The biggest impacts are born by those people who are already disadvantaged. Without urgent action these impacts will continue to worsen.
- Immediate action is required from government and all sectors of the community to slow global warming through reducing carbon emissions. The health sector can and must play a key role.
- Acting on climate change will deliver positive health improvements in addition to environmental benefits.

Introduction

The World Health Organization has described climate change as the defining issue for public health in the 21st century. It is an urgent challenge, with implications at the global, national and community levels.¹

Climate change threatens the essential ingredients of good health - clean air, safe drinking water, nutritious food supply, and safe shelter - and has the potential to undermine decades of progress in global health.² It is already impacting human lives and health in many ways.

As a health organisation, cohealth recognises – and is alarmed by – the profound risks to health that climate change presents. We are convinced that climate change is caused by human action and urgent action is required to reduce greenhouse emissions to minimise the impact of climate change. This stance aligns with, and supports, the cohealth vision of healthy communities, healthy people, and our strategic focus to be accountable for our environmental footprint and demonstrate our commitment to respecting ecological limits.

Climate change impacts on health

Australia is already experiencing the impacts of higher temperatures, sea level rise and more frequent and/or intense weather events such as heatwaves, bushfire, flooding,

¹ <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/public-health-wellbeing-plan/tackling-climate-change>

² https://www.who.int/health-topics/climate-change#tab=tab_1

and drought. These impacts threaten people's homes, livelihoods, health, quality of life, and employment, as well as increasing risks and burdens for future generations.³

The Victorian government recognises that 'Climate change affects all of us. Acting on it is fundamental for a thriving, resilient state.'⁴

The warming of the planet caused by climate change impacts our community in many ways (figure 1):⁵

- Increased frequency, intensity and duration of extreme weather events including prolonged heatwaves, droughts, floods and bushfires
- Hotter temperatures
- Worsening air quality from increased air pollution and allergens
- Reduced water quality and reduced availability of fresh water
- Reduced food production and risks to food safety

These in turn, have many direct and indirect impacts on our health including:⁶

- heat stress illnesses
- cardiovascular disease
- respiratory disease
- infectious gastrointestinal disease
- physical trauma
- malnutrition
- psychological stress, including trauma and long-term mental health impacts
- increase in the range and prevalence of air, water and vector-borne diseases
- occupational health impacts

The World Health Organization estimates that, between 2030 and 2050, an extra 250,000 deaths per year globally from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress will be attributable to climate change.⁷

³ <https://www.acoss.org.au/climate-and-energy/>

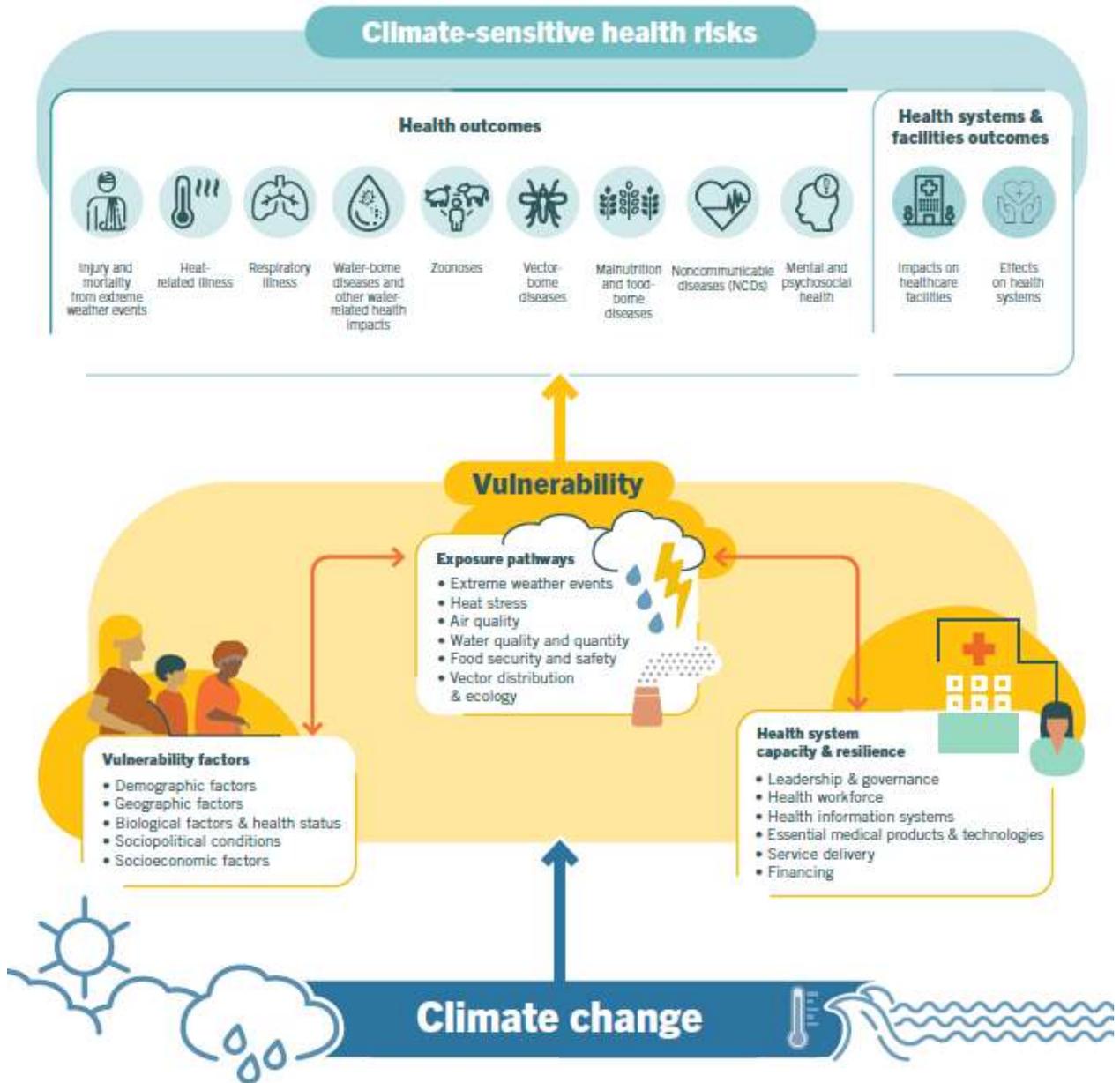
⁴ <https://www.climatechange.vic.gov.au/>

⁵ Climate and Health Alliance 2018 Briefing Paper 1 Climate change is a health issue https://www.caha.org.au/briefing_papers

⁶ Climate and Health Alliance (2017) Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia <https://www.caha.org.au/national-strategy-climate-health-wellbeing>

⁷ <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-health-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=3>, Quoting WHO 2015: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/>

Figure 1 An overview of climate-sensitive health risks, their exposure pathways and vulnerability factors. Climate change impacts health both directly and indirectly, and is strongly mediated by environmental, social and public health determinants.



World Health Organization (2021) COP26 special report on climate change and health: the health argument for climate action. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240036727>

Climate change will worsen inequality

The impacts of climate change will not affect everyone equally. They will be experienced most severely and disproportionately by the people who are already most disadvantaged, due to the unequal distribution of resources and power, particularly those in developing countries and people with fewer material, social and health resources. Climate change will therefore have its greatest effect on those who have contributed the least to its cause and who have the least resources to cope with it.

Health effects are expected to be more severe for children, pregnant women, low-income households, the elderly, people who work outdoors, and people with pre-existing medical conditions. As such, climate change will exacerbate existing health inequalities.

These groups are the individuals, families and communities cohealth works with. They will bear a greater burden of the impacts of climate change and will be further disadvantaged by them. cohealth's commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of the communities we serve demands that we take action to reduce the impacts of climate change on these communities.

Health benefits of acting on climate change

Acting on climate change will help us minimise these disastrous health impacts. Many of the actions we can take to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will also bring with them health co-benefits. Healthy eating and sustainable diets, walking and cycling for short journeys and taking public transport instead of driving are some examples of actions that will both reduce emissions and benefit health and wellbeing.⁸

'In addressing climate change by reducing emissions, we are preventing the worsening of health conditions around the world, and ... by improving so many different conditions that can be improved through climate measures – such as improving food and water, food security and water safety – we are actually improving health conditions.'⁹

Health sector response to climate change

Health organisations and their workforces aim to maintain, protect and promote the health of individuals, families and communities. With climate change posing such a significant threat to health and wellbeing the health sector can and must be a powerful force on this issue.

Health practitioners and organisations in Australia and around the globe are acutely aware of the imperative for action on climate change. In Australia the broad membership base of the [Climate and Health Alliance](#) reflects this recognition of the

⁸ Vic Health and Wellbeing Plan

<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/publications/policiesandguidelines/victorian-public-health-wellbeing-plan-2019-2023>

⁹ Christiana Figueres, Former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/7-quotes-on-climate-change-and-health/>

need to act on climate change. Many other medical and health bodies have spoken out about in other forums about the pressing need to act on climate change.

The health sector can act on climate change in a number of ways, including:

- Implementing work practices that reduce environmental footprint
- Contributing to broader efforts to tackle climate change at the systemic and political level. The health sector can use its experience and authority as health professionals to emphasise the health imperative for action on climate change.
- Preparing to respond to the increased demand for their services stemming from climate change
- Supporting the communities they work with to improve climate resilience

Health sector action is supported by the commitment of the [Victorian Department of Health](#) to act on climate change and to support the community to stay healthy in a changing climate. Victorian Government policies and plans include:

- [Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019-2023](#) recognises that climate change is a leading threat to health and wellbeing. Tackling climate change and its impact on health is included as one of four key focus areas in the plan.
- [Health and Human Services Adaptation Action Plan 2022-2026](#), building on the [Pilot Health and Human Services Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2019–21](#), the plan is designed to assist the sector embed climate change considerations into policies, planning, guidelines and operations, and respond to the risks posed to public health and wellbeing.

There has been little clear recognition from the Federal Government of the impact of climate change on public health. This is a critical gap in Australia's capacity to plan for and deliver a resilient health care system in the face of a changing climate.

Although a signatory to the Paris Climate Agreement, Australia's goal of a 26-28% reduction on 2005 levels by 2030 and the absence of a national zero emissions target is out of step with the States and Territories, trading partners, and other nations. It is insufficient to meet the Paris Agreement goal of keeping warming to 1.5 degrees.

The Climate and Health Alliance, in collaboration with climate and health experts and health stakeholders, has developed [Healthy, Regenerative and Just: Framework for a national strategy on climate, health and well-being for Australia](#). This outlines a set of policy recommendations for all levels of government, the health sector, business and community that will protect the health and wellbeing of all Australians from the impacts of climate change.

Climate policies will have public health benefits beyond their intended impact on the climate.¹⁰ These health benefits should be promoted as a public health opportunity, with significant potential to offset some costs associated with addressing climate change. Similarly, reorienting the health system towards preventative and primary care

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https://www.caha.org.au/climate_mitigation_the_greatest_public_health_opportunity_of_our_time_oi0s68tkpzrgrm3gfaixja

- caring for people in their community and reducing the need for acute, hospital care
- will have the added benefit for reducing emissions and lowering the carbon footprint of the health sector, given the intensity of resources used in hospital care.¹¹

Priorities for action

Systemic action and strong leadership at all levels of government and society is essential to reduce the harms associated with climate change. While the efforts of state governments and many health providers are applauded, a cohesive national approach is still needed to complement local organisational and individual efforts.

cohealth commits to the following actions:

- Reduce our carbon footprint by reducing greenhouse gas emissions from our operations, aiming for net zero emissions.
- Support the local communities we work with to understand the impacts of a changing climate, help build their climate resilience and implement effective mitigation strategies.
- Educate staff and service delivery partners about the impacts of a changing climate, in particular how it impacts on cohealth's clients and operations.
- Advocate for Federal, state and local government policies and programs that equitably address climate change hazards and impacts.

We call on the Commonwealth Government to:

- Urgently commit to stronger national emission reduction targets to cut climate pollution this decade and of net zero carbon emissions by 2035, supported by policies for a fair and inclusive transition.
- Develop a national response to address climate change and health, including coordinating action across all levels of government, such as the Climate and Health Alliance's [Healthy, Regenerative and Just: Framework for a national strategy on climate, health and well-being for Australia](#)
- Act to reduce vulnerability to interrelated challenges such as climate change, inequality, poverty and homelessness, and work with people experiencing disadvantage to identify priority strategies to support people most at risk from the health, social, economic, and environmental impacts.

The Victorian Government must:

- Ensure that the [Health and Human Services Adaptation Action Plan 2022-2026](#) and accompanying resourcing builds the capacity of the entire health and community services sectors – including community health - to respond and adapt to climate change and ensure ongoing service continuity and safety and quality of care.

¹¹ The carbon footprint attributed to health care has been estimated to be 7% of Australia's total, with hospitals and pharmaceuticals the major contributors. Malik, A et al (2018) The carbon footprint of Australian health care, Lancet Planetary Health.
<https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-51961730180-8/fulltext>

- Provide adequate support and resourcing to groups that experience disadvantage – including through financial investment - to ensure they can stay healthy in a changing climate.