The Opportunity

Addressing climate change could represent the greatest opportunity to improve public health in our time. Many actions that help limit climate change also improve the health of our families and communities. Public health engagement in climate change is extremely important to ensure that climate action strategies promote optimal health and reduce health inequities.

Climate Change & Health Impacts

Climate change threatens the health and well-being of California’s diverse population of nearly 38 million people. Climate change impacts health through a variety of environmental changes including more extreme heat, a decline in air quality, more frequent wildfires, increases in allergens, and altered environmental conditions that foster the spread of communicable and other diseases. Climate change also threatens the basic life support systems on which humans depend – our water, food, shelter and security. The resulting human health impacts can include increases in heat illness and death, air pollution-related cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, vector-borne and water-borne diseases, and stress and mental trauma. These challenges are disproportionately impacting the state’s most vulnerable populations and require mobilization of communities along with state and national strategies to enhance understanding of climate change and lessen its harm to the health of Californians.
Climate change poses immense challenges for achieving health equity because, while all Californians are impacted by climate change, populations that are socially and economically vulnerable bear a disproportionate burden. Low-income families, some communities of color, those with existing health conditions such as chronic diseases and mental health problems, children and seniors, the homeless, outdoor workers and farmers, immigrants, tribal nations, and isolated people are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. These are often the same communities where residents are less likely to have air conditioning, more likely to have one or more chronic conditions, and less likely to own cars to escape from natural disasters and extreme heat.

**Disproportionate Effects of Climate Change**

Many strategies for reducing greenhouse gas emissions also have a beneficial effect on health and quality of life. These co-benefits make actions for climate protection a “win-win”. Health benefits include a reduction in obesity, some chronic diseases, respiratory illnesses, injury, and improved community cohesion and mental health.

**Climate & Health Co-Benefits**

Co-Benefits of Active Transportation:
- Reducing GHG emissions from transportation by shifting away from automobiles and towards active transportation (walking, biking and using public transportation) is one climate mitigation strategy that can provide additional health benefits through increasing physical activity.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strategy to Reduce GHG Emissions</th>
<th>Potential Health Co-Benefits</th>
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| Reduced vehicle miles traveled (VMT)  | • Increase physical activity  
• Reduce chronic disease  
| Reduce emissions through land use changes | • Increase physical activity  
• Reduce chronic disease  
| Reduce energy intensity in local food systems | • Increase access to healthy and fresh foods  
• Reduce saturated fats  
| Urban greening | • Reduce temperature and urban heat island effect  
| Reduce residential building energy use | • Reduce energy costs  
• Promote healthy homes  
| Energy efficiency, weatherization | • Improve mental health  
• Reduce air pollution  
| Transit oriented and infill development | • Increase access to services  
• Enhance safety  
| Buy local, farmer’s markets, gardens, reduce consumption of red and processed meats | • Reduce air pollution  
• Increase social cohesion  
• Increase resilience  
| Tree planting, parks, green infrastructure | • Reduce air pollution  
• Reduce noise  
| Reduce energy costs  
• Promote healthy homes  
| Energy efficiency, weatherization | • Create local green jobs  
• Promote cooler communities  

Adapted from CDPH’s Climate Action for Health: Integrating Public Health into Climate Action Planning (see link below).

Further Reading:

**References**