

# Climate Change and Health

## Health Professionals Joint Call for Action

Health professional groups **recognise human-caused climate change as an increasingly serious and urgent threat to health and health equity** in New Zealand and worldwide. In contrast, rapid and effective action on climate change represents **an important opportunity to improve health**, by avoiding negative health impacts and by realising significant health and equity co-benefits from well-designed climate policies.

***We note that globally:***

- Climate change is already contributing to global disease, disability and premature death – most seriously affecting people in poor countries, and the poorest within all countries.

***We note that health threats for New Zealand include:***

- Direct impacts – e.g. from high temperatures and other extreme weather events such as storms, floods and droughts, causing illness and injuries.
- Biologically-mediated impacts – e.g. changing patterns of infectious disease, global rises in food prices impacting on New Zealanders' nutrition.
- Socially-mediated impacts – e.g. loss of livelihoods, forced migration, economic vulnerability and increased risks of conflict.

***We note opportunities for health through climate action, including:***

- More walking, cycling and public transport reduces greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, increases physical activity, and can reduce health-damaging air pollution and road traffic injuries.
- Healthy food production and diets that include more plants and fewer animal products could reduce agricultural GHG emissions, while improving freshwater quality, and reducing cancer and heart disease.
- Improving housing (e.g. insulation) reduces illnesses associated with cold, damp home environments, and also cuts GHG emissions from home heating.

These health co-benefits **could reduce the burden of ill-health from the leading causes of death and illness in New Zealand, such as cardiovascular disease, cancers, obesity and diabetes, with large cost savings to the health sector.** These direct benefits, along with indirect benefits from increased productivity of a healthier population, would help offset the early costs of addressing climate change.

***We recognise that:***

- Levels of health risk posed by climate change vary according to age, ethnicity, geographic location, and socioeconomic status.
- Those at highest health risk from climate change in New Zealand include Māori, Pacific peoples, children, elderly and low income people.
- Measures to address climate change have the potential to widen or reduce existing health inequities, depending on design and implementation.
- No country can solve climate change singlehandedly. Without taking rapid and sufficient action itself, New Zealand cannot effectively press for global emissions reductions.

***Our vision is:***

- A just transition to healthy people living in a healthy climate.

***As health professional organisations we call for:***

- A rapid, whole-of-society, transition to a net-zero GHG-emitting nation, which is based in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and designed to make the most of opportunities for health and creating a fairer society.
- A national emissions reduction target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. Different gases have different roles in this target, consistent with IPCC evidence about the role of long- and short-lived gases in the atmosphere and ocean and in achieving substantial reductions in the crucial next decade.
- This target needs to be accompanied by robust interim targets and emissions budgets that fairly share the global emissions budget, with transparent, responsive monitoring of progress.
- Health sector planning to prepare for the locked-in health impacts of climate change, and rapidly adapting to a net-zero emissions future.
- Measures that prioritise and protect groups likely to be worst affected - Māori, Pacific peoples, children, elderly, and low income people.
- GHG emissions to be a key performance indicator for health sector organisations.
- Health (including equity) Impact Assessment (HIA) to be routinely undertaken to inform key climate-relevant policies.
- New Zealand to demonstrate leadership in promoting effective and fair global action to reduce GHG emissions.
- New Zealand to demonstrate leadership in protecting health from climate change in the climate-vulnerable Pacific region.

**This call for action is supported by:**



The Royal New Zealand  
College of General Practitioners  
Te Whare Tohu Rata o Aotearoa



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- Professor Paul Brunton, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Division of Health Sciences, University of Otago
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