

Linking climate change and health impacts

While many health organisations are aware that climate change is impacting human lives and health in multiple ways, Sustainability Victoria wanted to know whether Victorians were making this link. We commissioned social research in 2019 to find out whether Victorians knew about and understood the link between climate change and health.

Our research included the views of...



Over
3000
Victorians



over **700** Health care professionals

Including, general practitioners, nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and medical specialists.

Climate change is our biggest health challenge

In 2019, the Australian Medical Association declared that climate change is a health emergency. They echo the sentiments of the World Health Organisation which describes climate change as the “greatest threat to global health in the 21st century.”



a future five-fold increase in the cost of public health is predicted (HSBC, 2019).

\$8 billion

projected annual cost to the Australian economy due to reduced productivity as a result of extreme heat (CAHA, 2017).

Climate change is already impacting Victorians' health



445 deaths

due to the smoke of the 2020 Black Summer bushfires



More than
4000

people hospitalised due to the smoke of the 2020 Black Summer bushfires



Ambulance Victoria had
700%

rise in call-out numbers for cardiac arrests during the 2014 heatwave



10-fold increase

in human reported cases of Ross River Virus since 1993 following flooding in 2016 in Victoria

The Victorian government has acknowledged that climate change is and will affect human health and wellbeing, with DHHS prioritising action on this issue in the Victorian Public Health and Wellbeing plan 2019-2023. Local governments must also consider climate change in their Municipal public health and wellbeing plans.

View the full report: Linking Climate Change and Health Impacts. Sustainability Victoria, 2020.

Victoria's knowledge gap on the health effects of climate change

Victorians rank health as the issue most important to them, yet the majority have thought very little about how climate change might affect their health.

90%

haven't thought about how health is affected by climate change

58%

when prompted, more than half agree climate change will have an effect on their health

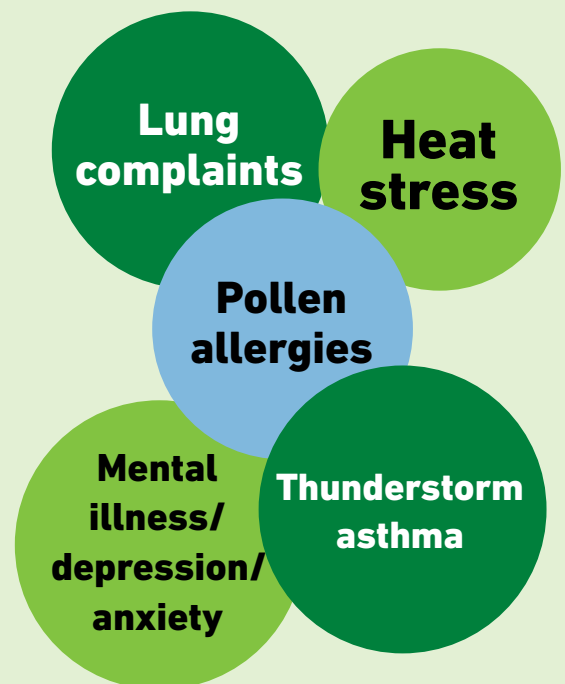


1 in 3 are not aware that health risks are likely to increase with climate change

Healthcare professionals are already seeing climate-related physical and mental health conditions in their community, such as heat stress and anxiety.

Most healthcare professionals believe a range of health conditions will become more common as climate change impacts increase. A large proportion of the public, however, is not aware of these increasing health risks.

Health conditions likely to become more common in Victoria due to climate change:

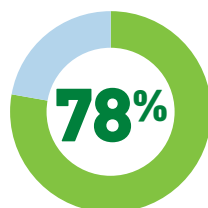


Victorians need and want more information

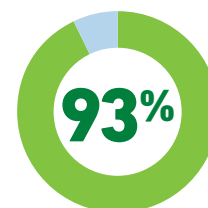
3 in 4



Victorians are interested in knowing more about the health impacts of climate change.



of Victorians are interested in knowing more about mitigation actions that will help curb climate change



of healthcare professionals agree that Victorians need to be better informed about the link between climate change and health.

Climate change effects on the health of vulnerable populations

There is a critical need to address knowledge gaps and plan effective public health interventions to address the health impacts of climate change in vulnerable populations.

Most healthcare professionals believe the following populations to be extremely vulnerable to the health effects of climate change:

- ▶ People with mental illness
- ▶ Indigenous people
- ▶ People under age 5
- ▶ Poor or disadvantaged people
- ▶ People living in regional and remote areas
- ▶ People over age 65
- ▶ People living in poor quality housing
- ▶ People with existing long-term health conditions

43%

of Victorians in poor health feel they will cope poorly financially.

30%

of Victorians in poor health feel they will cope poorly mentally.

28%

of Victorians living in public housing feel they will cope poorly mentally.

Thermal comfort of housing



Most Victorians don't know the healthy indoor temperature range. Healthy indoor temperatures range from **18-26 degrees**

95%

Healthcare professionals believe the thermal capability of housing will become **more important** as extreme temperatures increase.

50%

of all Victorians in public housing said their home was too hot last summer and/or too cold last winter.

45%

Victorians in public housing have **had to leave their homes** because of extreme heat or cold

Where do public housing tenants shelter when they leave their homes due to extreme heat or cold?



Swimming pools



Shopping centres



Cinemas



Libraries



Community centres

Emotions and the mental health impacts of climate change

Without serious action to reverse the effects of climate change, health systems worldwide will have to cope with a growing crisis in both physical and mental health.

In relation to climate change, Victorians feel...

 **33%**

frustration “a lot” or at “overwhelming” levels

 **26%**

sadness “a lot” or at “overwhelming” levels

 **25%**

outrage “a lot” or at “overwhelming” levels

Eco-anxiety and young people

Young people have higher awareness of the health impacts of climate change and are also more likely to experience strong, negative emotions when thinking about climate change.



When thinking about climate change, Victorians most commonly feel frustration, sadness and outrage.

Young people feel these negative emotions more strongly than the rest of the population.

Young people were significantly more likely than other age groups to think they will cope poorly with mental health as climate change impacts increase

Emotional responses are far strongest among young Victorians aged 15-24 years...

48%

Feel **frustration** “a lot” or at “overwhelming” levels compared to 33% of Victorians overall

40%

Feel **sadness** “a lot” or at “overwhelming” levels compared to 26% of Victorians overall

38%

Feel **outrage** “a lot” or at “overwhelming” levels compared to 25% of Victorians overall

The role of healthcare professionals

Most healthcare professionals believe the incidence of climate change-related health conditions will significantly increase over the next 10 years. This will correspond with increased pressure on health services and infrastructure. As trusted and credible voices in the community, healthcare professionals have a role to play in raising awareness of the health risks associated with climate change.

Educating the sector

85%

healthcare professionals

Believe the health sector should be doing more to protect people from health problems related to climate change.

Overall, healthcare professionals want more information and more training opportunities.

88%

agree there is a need for more training and professional development opportunities on this topic.

84%

believe the impacts of climate change on health should be taught in the undergraduate curriculum for all health-related professions.

Informing the public

Most healthcare professionals agree the public needs to **be better informed** about the link between climate change and health and air pollution and health. This desire is echoed by the wider Victorian population.



More than three-quarters of Victorians would like to know more about the health impacts of climate change.



86%

of healthcare professionals see a role for healthcare professionals in helping inform the public.



Only

1 in 3

healthcare professionals feel very comfortable talking to clients or patients about health and climate change.

The majority of healthcare professionals believe more action on climate change could take place in their own practices and organisations. Healthcare professionals are a credible force to help Victorians manage the health impacts of climate change and tackle climate change more broadly.