

HEALTH IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Climate change is the greatest environmental issue of our time; it is also the greatest health issue of our era. From a health perspective the evidence is very clear; climate change must be both mitigated and adapted to.

Climate change poses unique challenges for local public health care providers and the communities we serve. Identifying and implementing appropriate responses is daunting. In 2017 the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit completed a Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment that projects climate change impacts on health up to 2080. It also includes a detailed array of recommendations for our municipalities and community partners to mitigate and adapt to these climate change effects.

When it comes to climate change and health, everyone can be affected. Certain health outcomes and risk of illness are intrinsically linked to our climate. Our findings have implications that can be generalized to some degree to people living in other similar communities to ours in southern Ontario, including in small urban settings, rural farming areas, and the 'near north' cottage country.

CLIMATE IMPACTS ON YOUR HEALTH

MANY OF THE HEALTH IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE ARE ALREADY HAPPENING – AND YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED THESE IMPACTS IN YOUR COMMUNITY.



Heat Exhaustion

Hotter temperatures lead to more extreme heat events and associated illness, such as heat stress and exhaustion.



Food - and Waterborne Illness

Water quality will be affected due to increased bacteriological contamination, blue-green algae blooms, and overland flooding in extreme storms. This will impact people reliant on private drinking water systems and those who use our lakes for recreation. Activities such as swimming are highest risk but boating and fishing still have risk. Health concerns include eye, ear, nose, skin, respiratory, and gastrointestinal infections like E. Coli and giardia.



Lyme Disease

Ticks and mosquitoes will also be of increasing concern to everyone, as warmer temperatures extend the habitat and range of some insects, such as the blacklegged tick which carries the bacteria responsible for Lyme disease.



Injury and Mental Health

Changing weather patterns will mean more extreme weather events, including drought, flooding, winter storms, and forest fires. Not only will these events mean a higher rate of injury (during protection/evacuation of homes), but will also impact mental health, including increased risk of depression.



ACTION YOU CAN TAKE

While climate change is the defining public health issue of our time; it has also been called our greatest public health opportunity. This is because the kinds of changes needed to address climate change are also needed to improve health today – changes that clean the air, bring walking and cycling into our daily lives, improve pedestrian safety and thus increase freedom of movement for children, allow for seniors to more readily ‘age in place’ and remain housed in communities of their choice, and bring us together to socialize with family, friends and neighbours in beautiful outdoor green spaces.

One of the principal ways we can reduce our carbon footprint and support resiliency for health is by promoting community level actions. These actions can include building compact, complete communities that give individuals the choice to live, work and play in one community. Much of what is needed to adapt to climate change will also help to mitigate it, while additionally being directly beneficial to our health.

Trees & Plants



Tree coverage and green space within and between our communities is a great way to address climate change. Green spaces absorb carbon dioxide. They also contribute to adaptation by providing protection against heat and skin cancer, reducing storm water runoff and associated flooding, and improving air quality. Research is also increasingly demonstrating that local exposure to green, natural spaces directly improves physical and mental health, reduces stress and anxiety, and encourages physical activity.

Protecting and Enhancing Green Spaces



Investing in the protection and enhancement of green spaces, such as Ontario's Greenbelt, conservation areas, municipal forest tracts, agricultural lands, and urban forests can support mitigation and adaptation, while at the same time promoting healthier communities and residents.

Active Transportation



Transportation is Ontario's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions. Small changes to routines, such as walking or riding your bike instead driving, even for short distances can have a big impact, and are a healthy life choice.

Eating Less Meat



Reducing the amount of meat consumed in your diet can equate to large carbon reductions as meat is carbon intensive to produce. It can also help to reduce the risk of heart disease and obesity.

Green Infrastructure



Actions can also be taken to ensure that you are prepared for the changing weather, such as enhancing flood resiliency on your property through the installation of rain gardens and rain barrels, and planting native species.



ABOUT THIS SERIES:

The Greenbelt Foundation partnered with experts to understand how climate change is affecting our daily lives, and ways that we can individually and collectively respond to these challenges. For other installments in the series, visit www.greenbelt.ca/changing_climate