An estimated 12.6 million deaths each year attributable to unhealthy environments

An estimated 12.6 million people died as a result of living or working in an unhealthy environment in 2012 – nearly 1 in 4 of total global deaths, according to new estimates from WHO. Environmental risk factors, such as air, water and soil pollution, chemical exposures, climate change, and ultraviolet radiation, contribute to more than 100 diseases and types of injury.

The second edition of the report, “Preventing disease through healthy environments: a global assessment of the burden of disease from environmental risks”, reveals that since the report was first published a decade ago, deaths due to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), mostly attributable to air pollution (including exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke), amount to as many as 8.2 million of these deaths. NCDs, such as stroke, heart disease, cancers and chronic respiratory disease, now account for nearly two-thirds of the total deaths caused by unhealthy environments.

“A healthy environment is key to a healthy population,” says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General. “If countries do not take actions to make environments where people live and work healthily, millions will continue to become ill and die too young.”

The report was launched 15 March 2016 in Geneva, Switzerland. Click here for the full report, press release, infographics and commentary.

Burning opportunity: clean household energy for health, sustainable development and well-being of women and children

Millions of women cook on stoves or fires that fill the room with thick smoke from polluting fuels such as wood, dung and coal. The effects of exposure to household air pollution as a result of using these sources have a significant adverse impact on health and wellbeing. The most recent WHO findings show that household reliance on polluting fuels and technologies used for cooking, heating and lighting is widespread in low- and middle-income countries. In 2012, more than 60% of all premature deaths due to household air pollution were among women and children. It is the single leading environmental health risk and a main cause of noncommunicable diseases such as stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer and heart disease, for women living in low- and middle-income countries.

“Cooking and enjoying food are universal activities. However, cooking for pleasure in a safe environment is, unfortunately, anything but universal,” says Dr Flavia Bustero, WHO Assistant Director-General.

The solution to this crisis – universal access to clean household energy – has the potential to drive progress on Sustainable Development Goals for energy, health, gender equality, sustainable urban environments, and climate action.

A report was launched 17 March 2016 in New York, during the Sixtieth Commission on Status of Women. Click here for more information and here to read the full commentary.

Measuring and monitoring action on the social determinants of health

Reflecting on the five years that have followed the Rio Political Declaration on Social Determinants of Health, WHO and the Public Health Agency of Canada, in partnership with the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Institute of Population and Public Health, are organizing a meeting to advance the global, national and local measurement and monitoring of action on Social Determinants of Health (SDH). The objectives of the meeting are: to share national experience of action on SDH; to review approaches to measuring and monitoring action on SDH; to make recommendations for refining the proposed global monitoring system and report; to assess and increase monitoring capacity; and to assess the status and gaps of evidence required for monitoring of action on SDH. The outcome of the meeting will be a set of recommendations to refine the proposed global monitoring system and a report on action already taken by countries to implement the Declaration. The meeting will be held on 20–22 June 2016 in Ottawa, Canada.
Better water, better jobs – World Water Day 2016

Today, almost half of the world’s workers – 1.5 billion people – work in water-related sectors and nearly all jobs depend on water and those that ensure its safe delivery. Yet the millions of people who work in water-related sectors are often not recognized or protected by basic labour rights. The 2016 World Water Day theme, Water and jobs, focuses on how the quantity and quality of water can change workers’ lives and livelihoods — and even transform societies and economies.

World Water Day has been observed internationally since 1993 and this year it took place on 22 March. It is an opportunity to learn more about water-related issues, be inspired to tell others and to take action to make a difference. Each year, UN-Water sets a theme corresponding to a current or future challenge. One or more of UN-Water Members, with a related mandate, coordinate the engagement campaign.

Click here for WHO report on water, sanitation and hygiene in health-care facilities and here for information on WHO work on water, sanitation and health.

Health in All Policies training course in the Western Pacific Region

A Health in All Policies (HiAP) workshop took place in the Western Pacific Region, which aimed at supporting capacity strengthening and regional collaboration on HiAP among policy-makers in health and other sectors to tackle social determinants of health and to improve health equity. This workshop was carried out with the aim of facilitating and ensuring implementation of already agreed regional strategies and initiatives on anti-microbial resistance, noncommunicable diseases, tobacco control, water and sanitation, tuberculosis and health policy. The relevance of HiAP has increased following the launch of Sustainable Development Goals. The achievement of health-related goals depends crucially on successfully implementing a social determinants approach to health and health equity.

The workshop was held from 15 to 17 February 2016 at the University of Otago, Wellington, New Zealand.

Five Years Since the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami and Nuclear Crisis

Five Years Since the Great East Japan Earthquake, Tsunami, and Nuclear Crisis – Preserving and Conveying our Memories for Future Generations, an international symposium, was held to share the various efforts made towards the reconstruction and revitalization of Fukushima. Three people intimately acquainted with the plight of victims and families conveyed citizens’ perspectives while a few physicians presented their initiatives and reflections. There was a vigorous exchange of opinions from panellists with different backgrounds, united by a common purpose of reconstructing life in Fukushima. The symposium was held on 8 March 2016 at the Fukushima Medical University with numerous representatives from international organizations including WHO. For facts on Fukushima five years on, click here.

On 11 March 2011, a magnitude 9 earthquake occurred off the east coast of Japan, generating a tsunami that severely damaged coastal areas and resulted in more than 15,000 deaths. As a result of the tsunami, the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station lost its core cooling capacity, which can change workers’ lives and livelihoods.

In the past decade, deaths due to infectious diseases have declined. Increases in access to safe water and sanitation and decreases in households using solid fuels for cooking have been key contributors to this decline, along with better access to immunization, insecticide-treated mosquito nets and essential medicines.