World Health Assembly passes two resolutions related to health and the environment

During the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly delegates adopted two resolutions — Health and the environment: a road map for an enhanced global response to the adverse health effects of air pollution; and Role of the health sector in the sound management of chemicals.

The first resolution, Health and the environment: a road map for an enhanced global response to the adverse health effects of air pollution builds on last year’s first-ever World Health Assembly resolution calling for action to reduce health risks caused by air pollution (WHA68.18). The road map is a major milestone that sets out a concrete course of action to reduce an estimated seven million annual deaths globally as a result of air pollution exposure. Air pollution is recognized as a leading environmental health risk. Key elements of the road map include stepped-up actions by WHO and Member States to:

• expand the knowledge base on health impacts of air pollution and effectiveness of interventions to reduce air pollution;
• enhance national and global capacities to assess air pollution, propose interventions, and develop systems for monitoring and reporting air pollution health impacts and trends; and
• support the development and coordination of action plans and policies at city, regional and national levels.

The road map will also strengthen the capacity of the health sector to lead intersectoral actors in policies that aim to prevent air pollution-related diseases.

The second resolution, The role of the health sector in the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management towards the 2020 goal and beyond, calls on the WHO Secretariat to develop a road map for the health sector at national, regional and international levels towards achieving the 2020 goal and contributing to the relevant targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It also asks the WHO Secretariat to develop a report on the impacts of waste on health and the actions the health sector could take to protect them. To coincide with the Health Assembly, WHO released a report, Public health impacts of chemicals: knowns and unknowns. This report estimates that 1.3 million lives were lost in 2012 due to exposures to selected chemicals.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Executive Secretary a guest speaker at the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly

Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of UNFCCC, in her speech at the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly, stressed the links between climate change and health, including those related to the spread of vector-borne diseases. She called on governments to act on the Paris Agreement and encouraged health ministers to take a lead, noting that one of the most urgent aspects of climate change is its impact on health. Nevertheless, only 15% of the countries that have drawn up plans for climate change refer to health in those plans. Ms Figueres also stressed the importance of taking action to prevent health problems, noting that the great majority of health interventions currently focus on treatment. She concluded with a warning that if the world does not fundamentally change its approach to energy within the next five years, there is a risk that damage to the atmosphere will be irrevocable and continue to impact health for decades. For the full press release please click here.
PHE side events during the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly

During the Sixty-ninth World Health Assembly, more than seven side-events were held on climate change and health, Social Determinants of Health (SDH), Health in All Policies (HiAP), water and sanitation, and on air pollution. The following events were held:

**Climate change and health: taking stock, forging solutions**

Side-event provided Member States with an opportunity to discuss: how the Paris Agreement can affect efforts to strengthen health systems in the context of climate change; build adaptation and mitigation measures into health systems; and finding solutions available that can address the needs of the health sector. During the event, Ms Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary of UNFCCC, encouraged health ministers to take a lead on the Paris Agreement implementation, noting that one of the most urgent aspects of climate change is its impact on health.

**The insecurity and social determinants of health**

A side-event addressed the issue of health care in contexts of insecurity: identifying SDH as potential drivers of violence; exploring strategies to address health challenges through SDH in terms of prevention, ensuring safety of patients and health professionals; and raising awareness on the relevance of addressing SDH as a way forward to protect health and prevent insecurity.

**Health in All Policies (HiAP) for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

This event provided opportunities for sharing country experiences on mechanisms, tools and cross-sectoral actions in translating HiAP approaches into concrete actions and sustainable mechanisms, which will contribute to implementation of health-related SDGs at national and global levels. For more information, please click here.

**Three water and sanitation side-events**

These events provided Member States with an opportunity to discuss: the challenges of infection prevention and control, including lack of water, sanitation and hygiene supplies and highlighting solutions for overcoming key barriers; how to close the gap with regard to lack of water, sanitation and hygiene services in health-care facilities, especially in emergency settings; and specifically, the role women play in improving health in a range of settings, from health-care facilities to communities and schools.

**Reducing seven million deaths from air pollution: implementing WHA68.8 (2015)**

This event focused on reducing seven million deaths from air pollution. Examples of air pollution abatement efforts in national, urban, and household levels, and in sectors, such as housing and household energy, transport, waste management and power generation, were provided. In addition, the event identified ways in which action on air pollution can accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the Global Strategy on Maternal and Child Health; and health-relevant commitments for climate change mitigation.

WHO Global Urban Ambient Air Pollution Database

More than 80% of people living in urban areas that monitor air pollution are exposed to pollutants that exceed WHO limits. While all regions of the world are affected, populations in low-income cities are the most impacted. According to the latest urban air quality database, 98% of cities in low- and middle-income countries with more than 100 000 inhabitants do not meet WHO air quality guidelines. However, in high-income countries that percentage decreases to 56%. As urban air quality declines, the risk of stroke, heart disease, lung cancer, and chronic and acute respiratory diseases, including asthma, increases for the people living in these cities. In the past two years, the database – now covering 3000 cities in 103 countries – has nearly doubled in size, with more cities measuring air pollution levels and recognizing the associated health impacts. Click here for the press release, updated database, methodology, summary of results, and country groupings.

**Facts and Figures**

**Ambient (outdoor) air quality and health**

- Air pollution is a major environmental risk to health. By reducing air pollution levels, countries can reduce the burden of disease from stroke, heart disease, lung cancer, and both chronic and acute respiratory diseases, including asthma.
- Ambient (outdoor) air pollution in both cities and rural areas was estimated to cause 3.7 million premature deaths worldwide in 2012.
- Some 88% of those premature deaths occurred in low- and middle-income countries, with the greatest number in the WHO Western Pacific and South-East Asia regions.
- Policies and investments supporting cleaner transport, energy-efficient housing, power generation, industry and better municipal waste management would reduce key sources of urban outdoor air pollution.
- Reducing outdoor air pollution reduces emissions of CO2 and short-lived climate pollutants such as black carbon particles and methane, thus contributing to near- and long-term mitigation of climate change.
- In addition to outdoor air pollution, indoor smoke is a serious health risk for some three billion people who cook and heat their homes with biomass fuels and coal.

For more information, please click here.

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**SELECTED HEALTH TOPICS FROM WHO’S PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT WEB SITES**

- Air pollution and health
- International Programme on Chemical Safety

**REGIONAL PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT LINKS**

- WHO Regional Office for Africa
- WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia
- WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific
- WHO Regional Office for the Americas
- WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean
- WHO Regional Office for Europe

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