

Climate change and health: How nurses can help



Climate change leads to poor air quality, adverse impacts on food and water supply, and more frequent extreme weather events – all of which have negative impacts on human health.

Health impacts of climate change

The [International Council of Nurses](#) and numerous professional organizations such as the Canadian Nurses Association, the Canadian Public Health Association, the Quebec Order of Nurses, and the Canadian Nursing Students' Association have issued policy statements or resolutions calling on members to help decrease health care's carbon footprint, advocate for government policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and educate their patients and communities about climate change and health. Reducing the emissions of greenhouse gases by transitioning to clean, renewable energy and sustainable transportation and agricultural systems can reduce the severity of climate change and its associated health impacts.

According to the [Health Canada](#), these health impacts include:

- temperature-related morbidity and mortality, including respiratory and cardiovascular disease
- weather-related natural hazards, including injuries and social and mental stress
- air quality-related illnesses, including respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and cancers
- water and food-borne contaminants
- health effects of exposure to UV rays
- vector-borne and zoonotic diseases

Vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted by climate change, including low-income communities those living off the land, Northern residents, people with mobility issues, outdoor workers, and women and girls. The World Health Organization estimates 80% of the current health effects of climate change impact children under five.

Climate change can also affect health care delivery and access. Extreme weather events can disrupt infrastructure – including utilities, transportation, and communication systems – which are critical to maintaining access to emergency services and health care. Hospital supply chains may also be disrupted, leading to shortages of essential pharmaceuticals and medical supplies.

Health care's impact

Canada has the third-highest per-capita greenhouse gas emissions from health care in the world, with health care accounting for approximately 4% of the country's total emissions. Unfortunately, these emissions are increasing.

Hospitals are major consumers of energy through extended operating hours, and use of energy-intensive and specialised equipment. For example, in the United States, hospitals are among the most [energy-intensive buildings](#) in the country.

Nurses' role in climate-smart health care

With support and guidance from [Practice Greenhealth](#), [Health Care Without Harm](#), and [Global Green and Healthy Hospitals](#), hospitals and health systems across the globe are addressing climate change as a public health issue by reducing their carbon footprint, transitioning to clean, renewable energy, and building climate-resilient facilities. In Canada, the [Canadian Coalition for Green Healthcare](#), [Synergie Santé Environnement](#), and [Health Canada](#) are supporting health care facilities in increasing their resilience to the impacts of climate change. As the nation's most trusted professionals, nurses are powerful advocates for climate solutions and have a tremendous opportunity to protect their patients from the impacts of climate change by working to create sustainable, [climate-smart](#) hospitals and health systems.

As the nation's only organization dedicated to bringing the nursing voice to environmental challenges, the [Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment](#) amplifies the professional imperative of caring for the environment and addressing climate change within the context of our health care system.

“As the largest group of health professionals in the United States, and more than 20 million worldwide, nurses play an essential role in implementing climate strategies of mitigation and resilience, as well as interventions after climate events.”

Karen Cox, PhD, RN, FAAN, American Academy of Nursing president

“The Canadian Nurses Association is also calling on the federal government to implement strategies that: prevent and reduce the negative effects of climate change; increase health research and public education; and provide stable long-term funding to the health sector that addresses the effects of climate change.”

Mike Villeneuve, CEO, Canadian Nurses Association

The Nurses Climate Challenge

Sponsored by Health Care Without Harm and the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, the [Nurses Climate Challenge](#) is the nation's first campaign to activate nurses around climate change education and engagement. With the goal of educating 50,000 health professionals on the health impacts of climate change, the challenge provides nurses with free online resources to educate colleagues on climate change and health, present best-practice solutions, and engage others in taking action. The Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment is partnering with these organizations in supporting nursing engagement in climate education in Canada.

With well over 1,000 Nurse Climate Champions participating, the challenge has seen early success – nurses are leading the way to low-carbon, resilient, and environmentally sustainable health care. They're protecting the health of their patients, communities, and our environment.

Join the movement, sign up for the Nurses Climate Challenge today.