

Call to action from health community

Stop polluting the air we breathe: prevent diseases and save lives

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In March 2025 at the WHO 2nd Global Air Pollution and Health Conference, ministers, mayors, and other leaders of the world will come together to assess the current state of global air quality, and define how to tackle this pressing health crisis.

As representatives of the health community, we urge governments, world leaders and decision-makers to commit to strong, bold actions to ensure clean air for all.

The science is as clear as our skies must be. The time to act is now.

Our health is at stake

Breathing is the essence of life, our first act upon entering the world. Yet, for billions, even this fundamental act is fraught with danger due to polluted air, posing risks to our health and the health of future generations. Breathing polluted air is responsible for the deaths of at least 7 million people every year, with alarmingly 83% of deaths due to noncommunicable diseases such as ischemic heart disease, stroke, lung cancer and chronic respiratory diseases.¹

Almost every organ and system in our body can be damaged by polluted air, increasing the risk for many other health conditions like asthma attacks, negative pregnancy outcomes such as low birth weight, diabetes, infectious diseases and kidney disease.² Certain air pollutants even enter our brains impairing cognitive and behavioural development in children and contributing to dementia in older people.^{3,4}

¹ Sustainable Development Goal indicator 3.9.1: mortality attributed to air pollution. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024. (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/379020>, accessed 20 January 2025)

² Schraufnagel DE, Balmes JR, Cowl CT, De Matteis S, Jung S-H, Mortimer K et al. Air pollution and noncommunicable diseases: a review by the Forum of International Respiratory Societies' Environmental Committee, Part 2: Air pollution and organ systems. *Chest*. 2019;155(2):409–26. doi:10.1016/j.chest.2018.10.041.

³ Chandra M, Rai CB, Kumari N, Sandhu VK, Chandra K, Krishna M, Kota SH, Anand KS, Oudin A. Air Pollution and Cognitive Impairment across the Life Course in Humans: A Systematic Review with Specific Focus on Income Level of Study Area. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2022 Jan 27;19(3):1405. doi: 10.3390/ijerph19031405.

⁴ Cheng S, Jin Y, Dou Y, Zhao Y, Duan Y, Pei H, Lyu P. Long-term particulate matter 2.5 exposure and dementia: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Public Health*. 2022 Nov;212:33–41. doi: 10.1016/j.puhe.2022.08.006. Epub 2022 Oct 3. PMID: 36201876.

Air pollution affects everyone across the life course, even before we are born. Air pollution can damage the health of even the fittest young and healthy people, shorten the years of good health while increasing the probability of developing a health condition later in life.

The most unacceptable and appalling aspect of such figures is that air pollution related diseases and deaths are preventable through clean air actions that will also protect our planet, accelerate climate change mitigation and support economies.

Violating our right to clean air

The United Nations General Assembly has recognized the right to clean and healthy environments.^{5,6} Fulfilling the right to clean air will give billions of children and future generations the opportunity to grow and thrive in a world that supports their health, enhances their quality of life, and protects them from preventable diseases.

Access to clean air is a fundamental matter of equity and justice. Who bears the highest burden? The most vulnerable: people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, children, women, older adults, outdoor workers, and those living with disabilities or chronic diseases.

This health burden is often most severe in countries where not only air pollution levels are high, but where health systems and workforce are already too fragile to meet health needs, creating a double burden for patients, individuals and the community at large.

Cutting health cost, tackling health inequity

Clean air fosters stronger communities, reduces healthcare and other societal costs, and provides the foundation for a sustainable future where everyone can thrive.

The global health cost associated with exposure to air pollution is estimated at US\$8.1 trillion.⁷ The world is paying for the health consequences of air pollution yet less than 1% of global development aid is invested to improve air quality in low- and middle-income countries, home to the people most at risk.⁸

We do not accept the continuation of polluting processes and activities, and the violation of our right to clean air. We know that the economic benefits of reducing air pollution far outweigh the costs needed to implement the interventions. Solutions to clean the air exist, but the full political commitment as well as consistent financial support is still missing.

⁵ Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on 8 October 2021: The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. (A/HRC/RES/48/13). UN Human Rights Council; 2021. (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/g21/289/50/pdf/g2128950.pdf>, accessed 20 January 2025)

⁶ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 28 July 2022: The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. (A/RES/76/300) In: Seventy-sixth session United Nations General Assembly, 2021-2022. (<https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/442/77/pdf/n2244277.pdf>, accessed 20 January 2025)

⁷ World Bank. The Global Health Cost of PM2.5 Air Pollution: A Case for Action Beyond 2021. International Development in Focus. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1816-5. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

⁸ The state of global air quality funding 2024. London: Clean Air Fund; 2024. (<https://www.cleanairfund.org/resource/air-quality-funding-2024/>, accessed 20 January 2025)

Complying with WHO air quality guidelines to save lives

Smog chokes our cities and communities, fueled by emission from energy, transport, industrial and agricultural sectors, as well as from heating our households, and crop or waste burning. Wildfire and desert dust storms also represent an air pollution significant public health threat.

Even within homes, smoke from the use of polluting stoves and fuels, mainly for cooking practices, continues to endanger the lives of more than 2 billion people worldwide, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

In a world where 99% of the population is still exposed to levels of air pollution exceeding those recommended in the WHO air quality guidelines,⁹ there is no more time to lose for bold action in the name of health.

Without immediate action to improve air quality, achieving critical Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 will be impossible. Targets such as saving lives from pollution, reducing noncommunicable disease deaths, ensuring clean energy access, mitigating climate change and cutting urban environmental impacts are all at risk.

We, representatives of the health community, demand urgent, bold, and courageous actions from governments, cities, as well as private sector entities to reduce air pollution and comply with WHO's global air quality guidelines to protect health.¹⁰

A fair and just transition to clean energy

The use of fossil fuels – accounting for 80% of the world's energy mix in 2023 – is driving air pollution and climate change.¹¹ This figure dramatically calls for a transition to cleaner energy on a global scale.

As stated by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director General, “addiction to fossil fuels is not just an act of environmental vandalism. From the health perspective, it is an act of self-sabotage. This addiction not only drives the climate crisis but is a major contributor to air pollution”.

We call on governments, businesses, development agencies as well as philanthropies to invest more in clean air and health, supporting a just and inclusive clean energy transition, supporting fossil fuel non-proliferation treaties as well as the provision of cleaner fuels and technologies especially in low- and middle-income countries. Better health will only be

⁹ WHO global air quality guidelines. Particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10), ozone, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and carbon monoxide. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021. (<https://iris.who.int/handle/10665/345329>, accessed 20 January 2025)

¹⁰ Hoffmann B, Boogaard H, de Nazelle A, Andersen ZJ, Abramson M, Brauer M, et al. WHO Air Quality Guidelines 2021–Aiming for Healthier Air for all: A Joint Statement by Medical, Public Health, Scientific Societies and Patient Representative Organisations. *Int J Public Health*. 2021 Sep 23;66:88.

¹¹ World Energy Outlook 2024. Paris: International Energy Agency (2024). (<https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-outlook-2024>, accessed 20 January 2025)

achieved if resources are also ensured for Universal Health Coverage with accessible and affordable health care for all.

Demanding action for clean air everywhere: the WHO 2nd global conference on air pollution and health

2025 marks a pivotal year for clean air commitments from decision-makers and key stakeholders. WHO is inviting Member State governments, mayors, intergovernmental organizations, development agencies, civil society organizations, and the private sector to take part in this global effort and launch their commitments for clean air at the *2nd Global conference on air pollution and health: accelerating action for clean air, clean energy access and climate mitigation*.¹²

These commitments will not only lead to healthier populations and save lives but also help limit climate change, protect our planet, and reduce economic and global health cost in alignment with other global initiatives and processes to protect the health of people and the planet.

Health and care workers, patients' groups, members of civil society organizations and individuals support WHO in calling on world leaders and decision makers to stop polluting and ensure a future with clean air for all.

We call for bold action from decision and policy makers, donors and the private sector to clean the air for all. In their respective role, they should commit without delay to:

- Enforce robust measures to stop polluting the air, cutting emissions at source, and swiftly achieve the full implementation of WHO global air quality guidelines.
- Ensure just and inclusive clean energy transition and fossil fuel phase out in a fair and equitable manner.
- Strengthen actions for clean air, better monitoring and surveillance, and institutional capacity to limit air pollution and mitigate climate change.
- Increase domestic and international funding to elevate clean air as a priority on global and national health and political agendas.
- Build intersectoral workforces with the skills and capacity to design and implement policies to tackle air pollution, focusing on continuous awareness raising, training, research, and sharing best public health practices, especially in the most affected countries.

¹² WHO to host second global conference on air pollution and health. [online]. World Health Organization; 2024. (<https://www.who.int/news/item/19-06-2024-who-to-host-second-global-conference-on-air-pollution-and-health>, accessed 20 January 2025)

We commit to leading by example by:

- Raising awareness about the health effects of air pollution and its links to climate change among all actors in the public health workforce, patients, and the general public, along with effective measures to reduce emissions and exposure;
- Integrating air pollution into health curricula, training programmes, continuing education programmes, and professional practice and guidelines.
- Championing health and care workers in leadership and decision-making roles to influence air quality policies and initiatives in ways that prioritize patient, public health, and health systems.
- Reducing the environmental footprint of health systems while enhancing the quality and accessibility of care.
- Building collaborations across health and non-health organisations to support action for clean air.

[JOIN THE CALL TODAY!](#)

We as the health community see the consequences of air pollution first-hand. Health and care workers, patients, or parents of afflicted children see the damage that the toxic air is doing to people's lungs, heart, brain and other organs drastically diminishing our prospects for a long and healthy life now and in the future.

As dedicated and trusted voices, they are powerful advocates to leverage the health argument for clean air action.

We urge you to unite in this call to action to stop polluting the air we breathe and ensure a healthy future for both people and our planet.

Join us in making a difference today, participate in clean air initiatives, and share this call to action with your network to amplify the message.

[SIGN HERE](#)

Lead by example and submit your commitment for clean air.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CONFERENCE](#)

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