

How climate change will take a heavy toll on health



**Dr. G. Ganesan, General Practitioner. For contact:
gganesn95@gmail.com**

Last month two reports came out in media, meriting attention. One is that unprecedented rains lashed northern states, inundating several districts. The other is the report on deaths caused by heat waves, which was released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in Parliament. As on June 30, 2023, at least 264 people were killed in heat waves in 14 districts, said the report. The common factor between the two incidents was that both were triggered by climate change.

The problems in tackling global warming and climate change are often discussed in media. As the global warming increases every year, glaciers melt; sea water level goes up; towns will drown in floods and natural disasters will happen frequently. Thus, the earth we are living on is confronted with several risks. Have we realized fully what health hazards the mankind will face consequently?

Polluted atmosphere

As greenhouse gases such as carbon-di-oxide, methane, nitrus oxide and ozone keep piling up in the atmosphere, the earth gets warmer. Today's population explosion, new technologies, coal, petrol- and diesel-run motor vehicles, destruction of forests and modern lifestyle are the major factors behind excessive emission of greenhouse gases.

Of all greenhouse gases, it's carbon-di-oxide which is concentrated in the atmosphere in plenty. As the density of greenhouse gases emissions increases, the earth's heat keeps on increasing, taking a heavy toll on all creatures on the earth.

Increasing coronary diseases

It is a corroborated fact that if the particulate matter below 2.5 micron in the atmosphere increases, it will pose a hazard to human health. According to the World Health Organization's report, 2022, in India the PM 2.5 is 16 times the stipulated limit in the atmosphere. As a result, asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) double up. Aside from this, the particulate matter has increased the risk of blood vessel diseases including coronary disease, paralysis etc. Last year in India, out of the total number of people who died of these diseases, polluted air was found to be the main factor in 39 per cent cases.

Danger to posterity

When mega floods and storms happen owing to climate change, streets will be flooded with water, engendering mosquitoes and consequently triggering dengue, malaria and chikungunya.

If these diseases afflict pregnant women, they will contract anaemia and face the likelihood of birth of still-born and pre-term babies. There is also a danger of the birth of kids with congenital

disorder. Hence environmentalists are warning of hazards posed by climate change to our posterity.

Heat waves turning fatal

Yet another WHO report, 2023 has warned that 90 per cent of places in India cannot escape the wrath of heat waves. By way of corroborating the WHO warning, some data has been published in the reputable medical journal Lancet which says there was a 55 per cent increase in the heat waves fatalities in India after 2000. The main reason for this was that the people were affected by water-borne diseases as they chose to spend most of their time in water in order to cool themselves.

How diseases affect

The Indian environmental and health scientists have prepared a map, evaluating the datasets on the people who have lost health owing to climate change. They have found that out of 375 types of diseases, 218 will increase under the impact of climate change.

Generally, there are two ways in which climate change affects our health. In the first way, when natural disasters happen, the affected people will continue to live in clusters, increasing the risk of public health being dented. And there will be a scarcity of clean drinking water and consequently the people are prone to attacks from pathogens.

In the second way, nutritious food will be in shortage and thereby, people's immunity will suffer a setback. The danger is all the more acute for children.

Are we bracing against all these risks?

Needed: Action plans

In 2018 a national plan was drawn up to safeguard the people's health from the impact of climate change. The plan envisaged creation of awareness among the people about climate change,

toning up of medical infrastructure and upgrading of public health.

But the way heavy rains and floods lashed the northern states and the states concerned dealt with the disasters has brought to light the inefficiency of the government machinery. More pathetic were the scenes of the patients being evicted as floods entered into a hospital in Delhi and of several families staying under the flyovers. These scenes were highlighted by the media.

Therefore, it is now known that India's National Action Plan for Climate Change and Human Health has not been implemented in a full swing.

At a time when climate change's severity is being felt in India more than ever before, it is necessary to draw up new plans, improving on the old.

Of course, to tackle carbon emissions, planting of saplings is important. But more important is prevention of forest destruction. Likewise, plans are necessary for dealing with climate change-related health hazards. But more vital are preventive schemes that will mitigate the ill-effects of climate change.

For the purpose, datasets must be prepared on the spots prone to disasters, on the people likely to be most affected, on what kind of health hazards will arise and on how many people will bear the brunt of the dangers.

Then more attention should be paid to what are the necessary medial infrastructural facilities, what are the priority disease preventive measures and what are the long-term safety features. The union and state governments, environmentalists, health professionals, volunteers and philanthropists must all come together and discuss all these things. Clear-cut guidelines must be issued to all sections of people on prevention of ill-effects of climate change.

Translated by V. Mariappan