GoodRx Health

How Does Healthcare Impact Climate Change?

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Key takeaways:

- Healthcare is responsible for 4.4% of all carbon emissions globally. The U.S. leads in both total and per capita emissions.

- Climate change could have a major effect on health. It will affect everything from food and water availability to mental health. As temperatures increase, humans will also become more vulnerable to infectious disease.

- Healthcare facilities can reduce their impact on the climate by lobbying for greener policies, using their purchasing power to influence the supply chain, and making changes within their organization.

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Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperature and weather patterns. Since the 1800s, humans have contributed to climate change by burning fossil fuels and through activities that add greenhouse gasses to the atmosphere.

Climate change is expected to cause more severe droughts, storms, heat waves, rising sea levels, melting glaciers, and warming oceans. It is also a health crisis that may lead to more death and disease. As healthcare providers, it is our responsibility to provide care. So we must act to lessen the consequences of climate change.

Here, we'll look at the impacts the healthcare industry has on climate change and explore ways we can reduce our impacts.

How healthcare affects climate

According to a 2019 report, healthcare accounted for 2 billion tons of annual emissions globally, out of 51 billion tons caused by human activities. That means healthcare produced 4.4% of all global emissions.

If healthcare were a country, it would be the fifth-largest emitter globally. More than half of all healthcare emissions came from energy use, and the healthcare supply chain accounted for the majority of that energy.

In the report, the U.S. was the top healthcare emitter in the world, both in absolute terms and per capita. It emitted 546 million tons metric total, or 1.72 metric tons per person. By comparison, the European Union emitted 0.49 metric tons per person, which is 28% of the per capita emissions of the U.S.

Climate change and health

According to the World Health Organization, climate change is estimated to lead to an additional 250,000 deaths per year between 2030 and 2050. The deaths will be primarily due to an increase in diarrheal diseases, heat stress, malaria, and malnutrition. Some critics even argue that figure is grossly underestimated.

Climate change affects many social determinants of health, including clean air, access to water, and access to food. The areas most severely affected by climate change will be those with weaker healthcare infrastructures.

Climate change also increases the risk of a host of serious infectious diseases, including antibiotic-resistant infections, dengue fever, Lyme disease, and rabies. Increasing temperatures might also directly increase the risk of other noncommunicable diseases, like respiratory diseases, diabetes, and cancer.

Finally, disasters and extreme weather events that will be more common as the climate heats up can have significant effects on mental health. The trauma from natural disasters can lead to depression and anxiety. And stress from increased heat may cause higher rates of alcohol use, hospitalization for people with psychiatric conditions, and suicide.

Reducing our climate footprint

Developed countries are the largest emitters. But they are also the most capable of responding to climate change and its effects. So it is critical that these countries lead the way in decarbonizing healthcare while also helping the rest of the world reach net zero emissions.

Energy use accounts for over half of healthcare's carbon footprint. It includes consumption of electricity, gas, and steam, as well as air conditioning supply. As a society, we need to take steps to [decarbonize](#) the energy sector. That's outside the scope of individual healthcare facilities. But they can still play a role in this transition and reduce their own carbon footprint by:

- **Using [lobbying power](#) to press for clean energy policy:** This is perhaps the most important thing healthcare companies can do today to reduce emissions, because it will take societal changes to decarbonize rapidly.

- **Using purchasing power to force change, especially in the supply chain**: Forcing vendors and contractors to implement common-sense measures that reduce their environmental impact gives an organization greater influence on greening the healthcare industry.

- **Enacting facility changes that save money and reduce environmental footprint**: Many facilities face financial pressure, especially after COVID. So it makes sense to do things that will save money, like reducing energy consumption or waste — which also helps reduce a facility's impact on climate change.

Here are some ways facilities can reduce energy use and waste:

- Take advantage of the [tax credit](#) to install energy-efficient lighting.

- Reduce food waste in the cafeteria and nutrition services. [Agriculture](#) is a major contributor to global emissions. In the U.S., it is [estimated](#) that 30% to 40% of all food is wasted.

- [Compost](#) food that must be wasted.

- Build new facilities to [LEED standards](#), when possible.

- Find and reduce other types of [supply waste](#). When possible, choosing reusable products over disposable products often reduces the amount of materials a facility needs.

The bottom line

Climate change will have global effects on health. It is imperative that healthcare facilities reduce emissions to curb climate change. In addition, every player in the healthcare industry must prepare for the effects that hotter temperatures will have on human health.

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