

'Our Climate Is Changing, and Our Health Is Suffering' ACP Tells Congress



College calls for aggressive action to combat the impact of climate change

March 8, 2019 (ACP) – The American College of Physicians is urging Congress to take action to counter the negative effects that climate change is having on Americans' health.

“Because physicians are on the front lines of patient care, they are witnessing – here and now – the harmful health effects that climate change can and does have on the human body,” ACP said in a statement to the Natural Resources Committee of the House of Representatives, which held a hearing in early February on developing strategies to mitigate climate change.

“These harmful effects include: higher rates of respiratory and heat-related illness, increased prevalence of vector-borne and waterborne diseases, food and water insecurity, and malnutrition,” ACP noted. “People who are elderly, sick, or poor are especially vulnerable to these potential consequences.”

In addition to highlighting the numerous health risks associated with climate change, ACP called for government-funded research to understand and mitigate these risks as well as the inclusion of climate-change-related coursework in medical school curriculums.

A founding member of the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health, ACP has long considered the health effects of climate change to be an important public health issue. In 2016, the College published a policy paper outlining the steps physicians can take to help combat and prepare for climate change.

“Physicians need to educate their communities and patients about the impact of climate change on human health, and we need to think together as a medical community and a society about how to develop, implement and sustain energy-efficient practices,” said Dr. Ana María López, ACP's president. “We only have one planet.”

López said that, during her time at the University of Arizona College of Medicine, she was part of a committee that looked at the impact of climate change on health and worked on solutions to address the increasing prevalence of infection and vector-borne diseases in warmer climates and to develop disaster planning for heat-related illnesses.

“Awareness is the first step, and then comes thinking about disaster planning,” she said. “If we know it may be 120 degrees and some people don't have air conditioning, we have to think about large public spaces that we can open for water and respite during midday, when it is hottest.”

ACP's statement to the congressional committee noted what could be expected if immediate counteractions are not taken.

“As climate change worsens, an increase in global temperature and frequency of heat waves will raise the risk of heat exhaustion,” ACP said. “Asthma and other chronic lung conditions will be exacerbated by increased particulate matter and ground level ozone in the atmosphere. Exposure to infectious disease from vectors such as mosquitoes and ticks has and will continue to escalate. An increase in heavy downpours and flooding in America and the world has already, and will continue to, lead to an increase in waterborne diseases. Extreme weather events will take a human toll through increased incidence of stress, anxiety and depression.”

López said that the onus is on everyone to help curtail global emissions of greenhouse gases via their carbon footprint. She says she does her part by eating a largely plant-based diet and limiting her meat consumption, noting that meat has a larger carbon footprint than vegetables because of the amount of energy and resources involved in the farming processes. In addition, she said, methane – a potent greenhouse gas – is a natural byproduct of farm animals.

“I try to drive as little as possible and take shorter showers,” López said. “It starts with the individual and spreads to the family, community and society.”


To help physicians reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions in their practices, ACP has developed a Climate Change and Health Action Plan, complete with needed resources and tools.

“The U.S. should be taking even more aggressive action now to protect the health of our community's most vulnerable members – including our children, our seniors, people with chronic illnesses, and the poor,” ACP told the House committee. “Our climate *is* changing and our health is suffering as a result.”

More Information

ACP's position paper, [Climate Change and Health](#) , is available on the *Annals of Internal Medicine* website.

The College's [Climate Change and Health Action Plan](#) is available in the Advocacy in Action section of the ACP website.

ACP's full [statement](#)  to the congressional committee, including recommendations, can be viewed on the College's website.



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