

Climate change is disproportionately causing health problems for pregnant women, children, and older adults, according to a new Journal of Global Health publication.

The study published by WHO this week, highlights how climate hazards like heatwaves, air pollution, and natural disasters significantly impact these vulnerable groups.

Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to rising temperatures. The Research shows an increased risk of preterm birth, stillbirth, gestational diabetes, and high blood pressure during pregnancy. Children are also at risk, with heatwaves impairing cognitive function and learning, while air pollution increases respiratory illnesses. For older adults, heatwaves raise the chance of heart attacks and respiratory problems, and air pollution contributes to a higher risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and pneumonia.

The study even quantifies the danger, revealing a staggering 22.4 percent increase in infant mortality for each 1°C rise in minimum daily temperature above 23.9°C.

“These studies show clearly that climate change is not a distant health threat, and that certain populations are already paying a high price,” said Dr. Anshu Banerjee, Director of Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health and Ageing at the World Health Organization (WHO). “While awareness of climate change has increased, actions to safeguard the lives of those most at risk have barely scratched the surface of what’s needed. For climate justice to be achieved, this must be urgently redressed.”

The research team, a collaboration between WHO experts and international academics, identified a cascade of health impacts across different age groups:

High temperatures: Associated with adverse birth outcomes, cognitive decline in children, and increased heart attacks and respiratory problems in older adults.

Air pollution: Linked to high blood pressure during pregnancy, low birth weight, respiratory illnesses in children and older adults, and a greater risk of cancer and cardiovascular disease.

Natural disasters: Flooding, droughts, and wildfires disrupt access to clean water and food, leading to malnutrition and diarrheal diseases. Wildfires specifically contribute to respiratory issues and higher mortality rates for older adults.

While climate change affects everyone, those who rely on regular healthcare and social support are more vulnerable to disruptions caused by extreme weather events. In addition, infants, older adults, and pregnant women may have weakened immune systems or difficulty regulating body temperature, which makes them even more vulnerable.

“A healthy environment underpins health throughout life,” said Anayda Portela, scientist at WHO and an author of the paper. In addition to mitigating climate change and building resilience, we must also take specific steps to protect health during vulnerable stages of life. Continuity of care during disasters is crucial for those at greatest risk.”

The research aims to inform governments and climate action programs by highlighting the specific health risks faced by different populations. The authors emphasize the need for climate adaptation measures tailored to pregnant women, children, older adults, and those with specific needs. Healthcare, social care, and education systems can be prepared for extreme weather events, and people of all ages can be engaged in climate action.

As 2023 will be the hottest year on record and multiple climate emergencies like wildfires, floods, and extreme heat are predicted, addressing the health risks posed by climate change is not an option.