

Headline: Our health in a changing climate

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to dominate our individual and national priorities, discussions on climate change have taken a backseat. It's hard to think about global weather patterns and displaced polar bears when we ourselves are struggling to stay healthy. But climate change is inseparably linked to human health. If we are to look forward to a livable post-pandemic world, we must work now to make our homes and communities adaptable to a new climate normal.

The rise of illnesses is an observable health effect of warmer global climate. While some parts of the world have suffered spikes in deaths and ailments due to heat waves, a tropical country like the Philippines endures increased rainfall and flooding (also an effect of higher global temperatures). This translates to increases in vector-borne diseases like dengue and flood-borne diseases like leptospirosis.

Even outbreaks of infectious diseases can be fueled by the warming of the planet. As animals lose their habitats or seek more habitable environments, they raise the chances of bringing pathogens into new hosts such as our domesticated animals or even us humans directly.

Other climate-related health consequences include ailments from droughts or low water supply, respiratory problems from polluted air, injuries during extreme weather events, and illnesses that spread at evacuation centers.

The health impacts of climate change can be grave for those of us who are already vulnerable: those with chronic health conditions, those of lower incomes, and those who have no immediate access to health services, to name some.

This is why we need to reframe our thinking of climate change. It's not something that's distant and negligible. It affects each one of us in concrete ways, and could put our vulnerable loved ones in critical danger. It should be a personal concern and a public health priority.

Responses to climate change come in two categories: mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation tries to reduce the rate of climate change by curbing its causes such as the burning of fossil fuels. Adaptation, meanwhile, refers to efforts for us to adjust to expected future climate—or as some experts have put it, a new climate normal.

In the past, discussions on climate change focused heavily on mitigation, with the hope that if we committed to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, we would be able to “stop” climate change. Sadly, mitigation efforts may have been too slow, because recent reports from the International Panel on Climate Change indicate that even if greenhouse gas emissions stopped today, our planet would still continue to warm for centuries.

This means that climate adaptation is now just as urgent as mitigation. While we keep working to slow the rate of global warming, we must also prepare to live with inevitable climate-related changes such as extreme and frequent storms, rise in sea levels, and increased exposure to disease.

At the individual or household level, climate adaptability might entail food and water management, shelter security, health contingency planning, and disaster readiness planning, among others. But the burden of climate resilience should not be left solely on the shoulders of individuals and families. Climate adaptability, especially with regard to public health, should be a matter of public policy.

Looking at examples from Thailand, Japan, and other Asian countries, some of the more successful measures for climate adaptation include flood analysis and monitoring, early warning systems, disaster preparedness education, evidence-based land use planning, green urban planning, and agricultural insurance.

Health must be a key element in local and national climate policies. It is essential to assess which localities are most at risk for climate-related health issues, and to develop the adaptive capacity of those areas. For example, anti-dengue drives must be vigorously implemented in densely populated and waterlogged locales of the community. Access to basic health services must also be improved in anticipation of climate-related health trends.

As one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, the Philippines needs to have a greater sense of urgency in addressing the effects of a warming Earth. Last December, our country's Climate Change Commission failed to submit its climate emergency pledge to the Paris Agreement. We'll have to hope that our leaders will do better in responding to public health in the face of the changing climate.

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