



[Environmental Health](#) · [Health Equity](#) · [Tip Sheets](#)

Climate and health: Stories to watch in 2025

 [Katie Burke and Lara Salahi](#) January 7, 2025

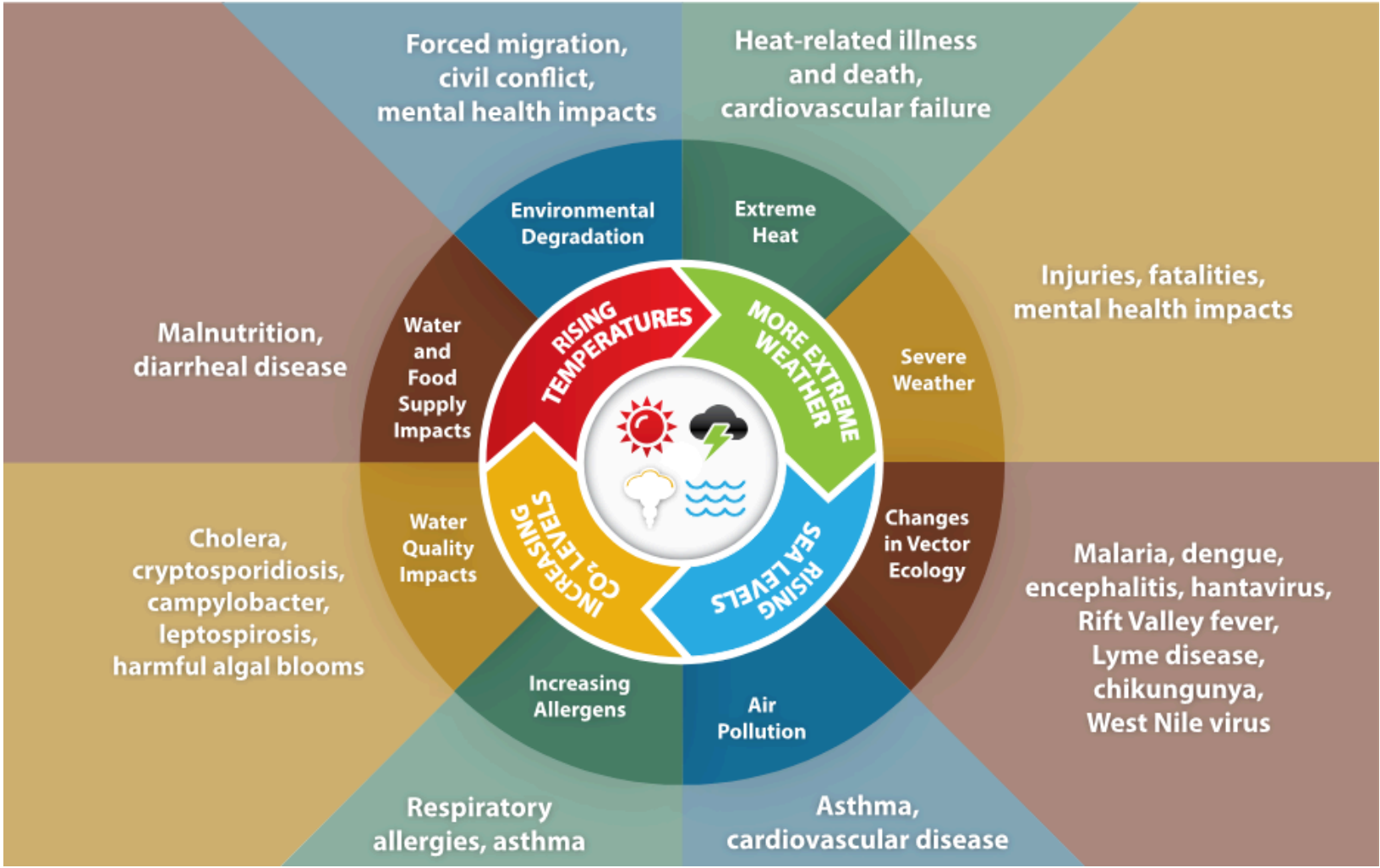
Share:     



Photo by Pixabay via Pexels

While climate coverage often focuses on heat, its health impacts have a broader audience appeal. Climate change affects air pollution, diseases and extreme weather. With [primary care doctors](#) ranked as the most trusted source of information on these health effects, medical professionals have a unique opportunity to educate the public about the far-reaching health impacts of our changing environment.

Medical schools across the United States are increasingly incorporating climate change and health into their curricula. [According to a 2022 survey by the Association of American Medical Colleges](#), more than half of U.S. medical schools now include the health effects of climate change as a topic in required courses — more than double the number reported in 2019.



Source: 2024 CDC report

Experts are also developing frameworks to standardize climate-related medical education within specialties, including [pediatrics](#). Hopefully, future doctors can recognize and treat climate-related health issues more effectively. Rather than an “expert knows best” strategy, clinicians can use these [effective communication methods](#), all of which journalists may find helpful.

Evidence-based communication recommendations

- 1. Communications need to come from trusted sources.
- 2. Leveraging social networks is key to shaping who is influenced and how they are influenced.
- 3. Establish and maintain social norms.
- 4. Focus on belonging and empowerment.
- 5. Use subtle, but powerful, language choices.
- 6. Use emotions.
- 7. Use visual images.
- 8. Use narrative communication to bridge the gap between health and climate change.
- 9. Present statistics to drive understanding of risk and motivate climate-friendly and healthier behaviors.
- 10. Identify and reduce barriers to enacting health behaviors.
- 11. Explicitly test messages with your target group.

Source: [Evidence-based recommendations for communicating the impacts of climate change on health](#)

Economic losses from extreme weather events have reached \$227 billion, a 23% increase since 2010. Coverage must emphasize that past safety strategies may no longer work in today’s climate, and highlight actionable steps to reduce carbon emissions within the current political landscape.

Here are some climate story ideas to consider reporting on in 2025.

- ➔ [Extreme heat](#)
- ➔ [Infectious diseases](#)
- ➔ [Wildfires](#)
- ➔ [Standing water and sea level rise](#)

🔗 [Air pollution from fossil fuel use](#)

Extreme heat

In 2025, we're closer to the projected [250,000 additional deaths per year from heat stress](#) between 2030 and 2050.

The health impacts of heat are often underestimated, especially in regions not accustomed to high temperatures. People in these areas may lack air conditioning or knowledge about preparing for outdoor activities during heat waves.

Heat stress on the body is more complex than many realize. [The need for cool nights to recover](#) is crucial. (For example, see the [recent post](#) on the effects of heat on chronic kidney disease.) [Emergency room visits](#) for conditions including infectious diseases, ear infections, and heat-related illnesses increase during heat waves.

Heat and older adults. Common medications, including some antidepressants and those frequently prescribed to older adults, [can exacerbate](#) heat vulnerability. The health consequences of extreme heat are becoming increasingly severe. [Heat-related mortality among people over the age of 65](#) has risen dramatically, with a record-breaking 167% increase compared to the 1990s, far exceeding the expected 65% increase without temperature rise. Heat exposure also affects physical activity and sleep quality, with a record high of 27.7% more hours at risk of heat stress for outdoor activities and a 6% increase in sleep loss compared to historical averages.

Food and water insecurity. In 2023, [almost half](#) of the global land area experienced at least one month of extreme drought. In 2022, 151 million more people experienced moderate or severe food insecurity across 124 countries than in 1981 to 2010, the highest recorded value. Extreme heat affects agricultural workers and crop reliability and yields, all of which in turn impact food prices and availability. Journalists need to raise awareness among audiences that food and water availability is a health and climate issue.

Urban heat islands. Investigate how different regions are preparing for this increase. Consider focusing on how cities and vulnerable populations in urban areas are adapting to increasing temperatures.

Power grid stress. Investigate how power grids are coping with increased demand for cooling during heat waves and the health implications of potential blackouts.

Infectious diseases

Rising temperatures and extreme weather events have led to an increased prevalence of waterborne pathogens. However, there are additional climate-related pathogenic events to consider.

Vector-borne disease spread. *Vector-borne disease spread.* [Dengue fever cases reached a global record high](#) of more than 10 million in 2024, and are set to increase and spread this year. Investigate how climate change is altering the geographic range of vector-borne diseases dengue fever and even malaria.

Zoonotic diseases. Multiple environmental changes, including climate, have affected ecological patterns and made disease spillovers from animals to humans more likely. For example, changes in bird migration [are affecting](#) the spread of avian influenza. The majority of the [61 human H5N1 cases reported in the U.S. since April 2024](#) have been mild, with almost all resulting from direct contact with infected livestock. A recent case in Louisiana is [the first linked to exposure to backyard flocks](#). Nevertheless, experts suggest that the likelihood of widespread human infection from this strain is low.

To begin to address this increased risk of zoonotic disease outbreaks, [experts suggest](#) increased "collaboration among investigators in human and veterinary medicine, public health leadership, health care providers, and occupational authorities (especially agricultural)."

Other areas of infectious disease worth exploring include the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and [the changing incidence of food-borne diseases](#).

Wildfires

Wildfire smoke poses a significant health risk that extends far beyond the immediate vicinity of the fires, affecting populations across the United States, including those on the East Coast who may not realize the impact of distant Western wildfires. [A recent study found](#) that during six "hotspot" days in June 2023, when wildfire smoke from Canadian fires drifted across the U.S., there was a 20% [increase in medical visits for lung and heart conditions in Maryland](#).

While awareness of the health impacts of wildfires is generally higher in areas closer to them, the widespread nature of the risk warrants more stories, even in regions that once rarely covered the phenomenon.

Air quality and respiratory health. Report on the increasing frequency and intensity of wildfires and their impact on air quality and respiratory diseases. This is especially concerning for firefighters and other first responders as they respond to more frequent and intense wildfires.

Emergency response systems. Analyze how health care systems are adapting to cope with mass evacuations and increased demand during wildfire seasons.

Long-term health effects. Investigate the long-term health consequences of repeated exposure to wildfire smoke, particularly on children and the elderly.

Standing water and sea level rise

Coastal population displacement. In 2025, we are now approaching the midpoint of 2050, when an estimated 800 million people in 570 coastal cities worldwide could be [at risk from a sea level rise](#) of more than half a meter. Focus on how communities are adapting or relocating.

Saltwater intrusion into water supplies. Investigate the “slow poison” of saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers. According to a report by the [National Centre for Environmental Health](#), saltwater in Hilton Head, North Carolina, is encroaching at a rate of 400 feet per year from the Atlantic Ocean into freshwater drinking systems. Of Hilton Head’s 12 original drinking water wells, six have been abandoned and an additional five may already be contaminated. In Bangladesh, where saltwater intrusion [affects](#) the drinking water of millions of people, [documented health effects include](#) high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, high infant mortality, high number of miscarriages and diarrheal disease. Investigate whether other coastal areas may be grappling with similar problems.

Infrastructure damage. Explore how rising sea levels are impacting sewage and sanitation systems in coastal areas, potentially increasing exposure to waterborne pathogens.

Health equity. Examine how sea level rise disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, including those in low-income regions and small island developing communities. Consider the psychological toll on communities facing the prospect of relocation due to rising seas.

Additional catastrophic water-related events such as storms and floods have also led to growing health concerns. Here are just a few to consider:

Water-borne diseases. Investigate the [increased risk of water-borne diseases](#) following floods, particularly in areas with damaged infrastructure.

Contamination and water pollution. After Hurricane Helene, cleanup crews in Marshall, North Carolina, [reported that](#) their boots melted in the mud near a plastics plant, and local news [provided](#) information about safety amid the uncertainty about what was going on. Raise awareness that floodwaters must be avoided because they are usually contaminated with wastewater and toxins, and inform residents and volunteers about where protective gear is being distributed.

Food security. Examine how storms and floods are impacting agricultural production and food security, potentially leading to [malnutrition](#).

Health care access. Report on how extreme weather events are disrupting access to health care, especially in vulnerable regions and among vulnerable groups.

Vector-borne diseases. Explore how changing weather patterns alter the distribution of disease vectors like mosquitoes.

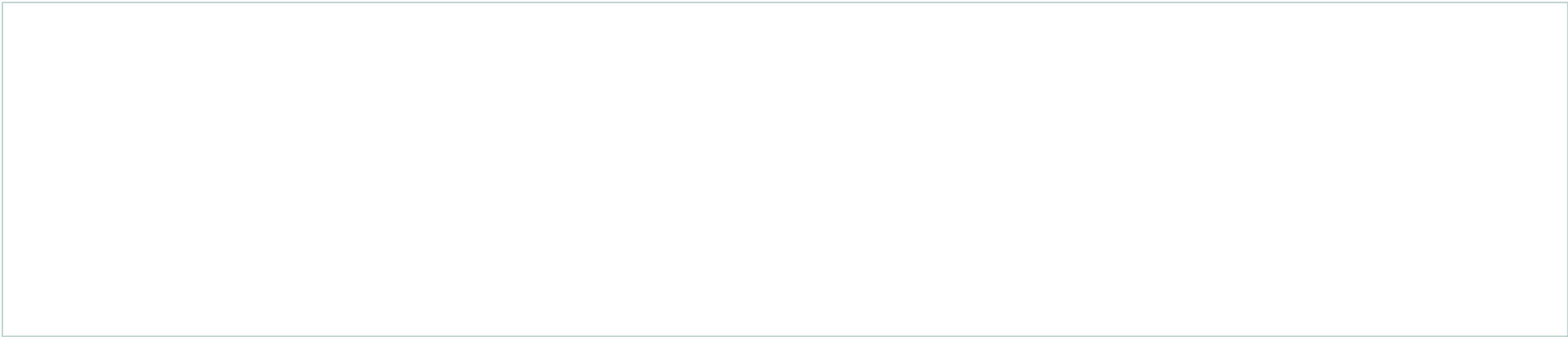
Air pollution from fossil fuel use

The proportion of electricity from clean energy sources rose 10.5% in 2023, almost double that of 2016. Deaths from fossil-fuel-related air pollution have [declined by 7%](#), largely due to the phasing out of coal power plants. The clean energy industry continues to gain momentum, and the United States is [poised](#) to be a leader.

Even though many of the environmental benefits of curbing carbon emissions will be felt decades from now, many health benefits [happen right away](#). Yet people [often think](#) that the benefits will be felt in the future, not immediately once emissions drop.

Asthma risks. Recent studies show that cleaner energy has immediate effects on people with asthma and on populations at greater risk for developing the condition. In California, counties with the greatest increases in the use of electric vehicles saw the [biggest drops](#) in asthma-related emergency room visits. Every time natural gas is used in a home, the health picture [gets worse](#), particularly regarding childhood asthma. Consumers need to know that when it’s time to replace a gas-powered appliance, they can choose a non-gas-powered option and have immediate health benefits. Explore how clean energy transitions could affect one’s region, especially how well people can breathe.

Preterm births. In California, after the retirement of eight coal and oil power plants, the prevalence of preterm births among mothers who lived within 5 kilometers of the plants [dropped](#) from 7% to 5%. Explore the public health effects of clean energy transitions in your region, even ones that don’t directly link to breathing. Air pollution from fossil fuels has [many well-documented health effects](#).



Recent Posts



[How to cover SNAP and WIC cuts after USDA ends food security reports](#)



[A therapist’s advice to freelance journalists on coping with job uncertainty](#)



[Poverty costs older Americans nearly a decade of life](#)



Katie Burke and Lara Salahi

[Learn More](#)

Share:



Tags:

- [air pollution](#)[air quality](#)[extreme heat](#)[food insecurity](#)[fossil fuels](#)[infectious diseases](#)[sea level rise](#)[standing water](#)[wildfires](#)

Related Posts



[Environmental Health](#) • [Infectious Diseases](#) • [Medical Studies](#) • [Tip Sheets](#)

How To Cover Environmental Exposure Studies



[Tara Haelle](#)



[Environmental Health](#) • [Health Equity](#) • [Why This Matters](#)

PFAS May Contaminate Drinking Water Of One In Five Americans, Study Suggests



[Lara Salahi](#)

FREELANCERS

- Pitching, Reporting and Writing
- Running a Business
- Tools and Apps
- Freelance Market Guide
- Awards, Grants & Fellowships
- Networking
- Freelancer Directory ↗
- A Typical Workday

ABOUT

- History
- Board of Directors & Committees

Staff

Contributors

Center for Excellence in Health Care Journalism

Advocacy

Commitment to Diversity

Governance & Financials

Current Supporters

TRAINING & EVENTS

AWARDS

OPPORTUNITIES

MEMBERSHIP

CONTACT

ADVERTISE WITH US

REPUBLISHING POLICY

CORRECTIONS POLICY

LOGIN ↗

DONATE ↗

