TIPS & TOOLS

ClimateAccess

Making the connection between climate change and health

Evidence is mounting around how climate change is affecting human health. Many audiences, however, still don't connect these issues – partly because they're not yet well acknowledged in the public sphere. Using a health frame offers unique opportunities to make climate change current and tangible, enabling communicators to overcome political polarization and reach audiences of all stripes.

Why the public health frame?

- Caring for our own health and the health of others is a value that reaches across the aisles in America. It is not affected by political polarization in the same way as climate change.
- Health risks can make climate change real, personal and immediate for people.
- Even climate deniers may be willing to acknowledge that coal is a "dirty" energy source that can have negative effects on health.

What can we say about the connections between climate and public health?

Climate change has been shown to negatively impact public health in many ways:

- Reduced air quality, wildfires and smog increase the risk of asthma and other respiratory illnesses.
- Higher temperatures and heat waves lead to more heat-related death and injuries.
- Earlier springs and longer summers give way to extended allergy seasons.
- Extended drought can impact water quality and availability for humans and ecosystems.
- Extreme weather events like Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy lead to physical dangers, reduction in care and increases in mental illness.

Four tips for making the health-climate connection:

1. Cite a trusted source

Research shows that people are most trusting of experts or spokespeople they believe share their values and are working on an issue locally. Public health professionals are trusted experts who are not a common voice in climate discourse and therefore potentially seen as more neutral. Doctors in the National Medical Association and the American Thoracic Society say they are already seeing the affects of climate change in their patients and are increasingly speaking up about the challenge.

2. Pick one and make it local, immediate and personal

Most people likely know someone who has been impacted by asthma, allergies, extreme weather or poor air quality. These health problems are part of a story we can all understand and relate to. Use a clear, simple, current example of a health impact that demonstrates how climate change is a real threat to our families, our communities and ourselves. When people feel more personally at risk, they may feel an increased motivation to act.

3. Appeal to intrinsic motivations to do the right thing and stress the urgency

Climate change has been called a "medical emergency" by public health organizations and people – in local communities and remote countries – are feeling the impacts. Children, the elderly and the poor are at most risk to climate change impacts, including related health problems. Frame our moral duty and opportunity to protect the most vulnerable as the right thing to do.

4. Emphasize the benefits of action and make it a win-win for everyone

Pivoting from the problems posed by climate change to potential solutions is a critical part of the narrative. As you outline specific solutions be sure to highlight the immediate benefits, health-related and not, of taking action. These benefits to the community can include:

- Cleaner air (lowered rates of respiratory diseases)
- Cleaner water
- Improved public transportation systems
- More green spaces
- Reduced heat (via reduction in the urban heat island effect)
- Reduced health inequality
- Reduced exposure to environmental hazards

Sources:

Conveying the Human Implications of Climate Change. By Edward Maibach, Matthew Nisbet, Melinda Waters from the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication.

Health and Climate Change: Communicating the Latest Lancet Report. Podcast from Tree Alerts.

White House Public Health and Climate Change Summit. Including a communications panel featuring Edward Maibach and Joe Romm.

Health and climate change: policy responses to protect public health. From the Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change.

Cool Neighbourhoods are Healthy Neighbourhoods: How local government actions on climate change help to create healthier communities. From Vancouver Coastal Health.

Or, check out our collection of **public health resources** on Climate Access.