

## THE EFFECTS OF AIR POLLUTION ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN HEALTH

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### ABSTRACT

*Pollution is the introduction of contaminants into the natural environment that cause adverse change. Air pollution includes anything introduced by humans into the atmosphere with a damaging effect. The main cause of air pollution is the burning of fossil fuels in cars, in planes and for the production of electricity. Air pollution occurs when any chemicals or biological matter that can harm humans or other living things is introduced into the atmosphere. Pollutants in the air include carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and small particles that are a result of burning different materials, especially coal. These pollutants not only harm individuals by causing disease, but also harm the environment by adding to global warming. Pollution affects all humans, children more so than adults because children spend more time outside and take in more air, and air pollution, when breathing, especially when exerting them.*

*The main air pollutants affect the lungs most. Sulphur dioxide irritates eyes, nose and throat. When inhaled, cause severe lung problems, such as asthma, bronchitis, emphysema and lung cancer. Nitrogen dioxide damages lung tissue and can restrict airways and cause emphysema. It also leads to formation of ozone, which can eat holes in lung tissue, aggravate asthma and leave people susceptible to respiratory disease. Carbon monoxide, which is invisible and odourless, can lead to damage of the heart and central nervous system, headaches, dizziness, convulsions and death. Air pollution affects the whole earth ecosystem. Global warming, caused by carbon dioxide building up in the atmosphere, traps heat in the earth's atmosphere, which can cause dramatic climate changes that shift the delicate balance of ecosystems around the world. A number of chemicals that have been released into the air, such as chlorofluorocarbons, have caused depletion of the protective ozone layer, which causes harmful ultraviolet radiation to reach the earth. Air pollution may be prevented only if individuals and businesses stop using toxic substances that cause air pollution in the first place. This would require the cessation of all fossil fuel-burning processes, from industrial manufacturing to home use of air conditioners.*

**Keywords:** Pollution, Air pollution, Pollutants, Atmosphere, Carbon dioxide, Global warming.

### INTRODUCTION

Air pollution is the introduction into the atmosphere of chemicals, particulates, or biological materials that cause discomfort, disease, or death to humans, damage other living organisms such as food crops, or damage the natural environment or environment. The atmosphere is a complex dynamic natural gaseous system that is essential to support life on planet Earth. Stratospheric ozone depletion due to air pollution has long been recognized as a threat to human health as well as to the Earth's ecosystems. Indoor air pollution and urban air quality are listed as two of the World's Worst Toxic Pollution Problems in the 2008 Blacksmith Institute World's Worst Polluted Places report.

Air pollution, contamination of the air by noxious gases and minute particles of solid and liquid matter (particulates) in concentrations that endanger health. The major sources of air pollution are transportation engines, power and heat generation, industrial processes, and the burning of solid waste.

The combustion of gasoline and other hydrocarbon fuels in automobiles, trucks, and jet airplanes produces several primary pollutants: nitrogen oxides, gaseous hydrocarbons, and carbon monoxide, as well as large quantities of particulates, chiefly lead. In the presence of sunlight, nitrogen oxides combine with hydrocarbons to form a secondary class of pollutants, the photochemical oxidants, among them ozone and the eye-stinging peroxyacetyl nitrate (PAN). Nitrogen oxides also react with oxygen in the air to form nitrogen dioxide, a foul-smelling brown gas. In urban areas like Los Angeles where transportation is the main cause of air pollution, nitrogen dioxide tints the air, blending with other contaminants and the atmospheric water vapor to produce brown smog. Although the use of catalytic converters has reduced smog-producing compounds in motor vehicle exhaust emissions, studies have shown that in so doing the converters produce nitrous oxide, which contributes substantially to global warming.

**Pollutants:** A substance in the air that can be harmful to humans and the environment is known as an air pollutant. Pollutants can be in the form of solid particles, liquid droplets, or gases. In addition, they may be

natural or man-made. Pollutants can be classified as primary or secondary. Usually, primary pollutants are directly emitted from a process, such as ash from a volcanic eruption, the carbon monoxide gas from a motor vehicle exhaust or sulphur dioxide released from factories. Secondary pollutants are not emitted directly. Rather, they form in the air when primary pollutants react or interact. An important example of a secondary pollutant is ground level ozone — one of the many secondary pollutants that make up photochemical smog. Some pollutants may be both primary and secondary: that is, they are both emitted directly and formed from other primary pollutants.

#### **Major primary pollutants produced by human activity include**

Sulphur oxides ( $\text{SO}_x$ ) - especially sulphur dioxide, a chemical compound with the formula  $\text{SO}_2$ .  $\text{SO}_2$  is produced by volcanoes and in various industrial processes. Since coal and petroleum often contain sulphur compounds, their combustion generates sulfur dioxide. Further oxidation of  $\text{SO}_2$ , usually in the presence of a catalyst such as  $\text{NO}_2$ , forms  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , and thus acid rain. This is one of the causes for concern over the environmental impact of the use of these fuels as power sources.

Nitrogen oxides ( $\text{NO}_x$ ) - especially nitrogen dioxide are emitted from high temperature combustion, and are also produced naturally during thunderstorms by electric discharge. Can be seen as the brown haze dome above or plume downwind of cities. Nitrogen dioxide is the chemical compound with the formula  $\text{NO}_2$ . It is one of the several nitrogen oxides. This reddish-brown toxic gas has a characteristic sharp, biting odor.  $\text{NO}_2$  is one of the most prominent air pollutants.

Carbon monoxide ( $\text{CO}$ )- is a colourless, odorless, non-irritating but very poisonous gas. It is a product by incomplete combustion of fuel such as natural gas, coal or wood. Vehicular exhaust is a major source of carbon monoxide.

Volatile organic compounds - VOCs are an important outdoor air pollutant. In this field they are often divided into the separate categories of methane ( $\text{CH}_4$ ) and non-methane (NMVOCs). Methane is an extremely efficient greenhouse gas which contributes to enhanced global warming. Other hydrocarbon VOCs are also significant greenhouse gases via their role in creating ozone and in prolonging the life of methane in the atmosphere, although the effect varies depending on local air quality. Within the NMVOCs, the aromatic compounds benzene, toluene and xylene are suspected carcinogens and may lead to leukemia through prolonged exposure. 1,3-butadiene is another dangerous compound which is often associated with industrial uses.

Particulates, alternatively referred to as particulate matter (PM), atmospheric particulate matter, or fine particles, are tiny particles of solid or liquid suspended in a gas. In contrast, aerosol refers to particles and the gas together. Sources of particulates can be man made or natural. Some particulates occur naturally, originating from volcanoes, dust storms, forest and grassland fires, living vegetation, and sea spray. Human activities, such as the burning of fossil fuels in vehicles, power plants and various industrial processes also generate significant amounts of aerosols. Averaged over the globe, anthropogenic aerosols—those made by human activities—currently account for about 10 percent of the total amount of aerosols in our atmosphere. Increased levels of fine particles in the air are linked to health hazards such as heart disease, altered lung function and lung cancer.

Persistent free radicals connected to airborne fine particles could cause cardiopulmonary disease.

**Toxic metals, such as lead and quick silver, especially their compounds:** Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) - harmful to the ozone layer emitted from products currently banned from use.

Ammonia ( $\text{NH}_3$ ) - emitted from agricultural processes. Ammonia is a compound with the formula  $\text{NH}_3$ . It is normally encountered as a gas with a characteristic pungent odor. Ammonia contributes significantly to the nutritional needs of terrestrial organisms by serving as a precursor to foodstuffs and fertilizers. Ammonia, either directly or indirectly, is also a building block for the synthesis of many pharmaceuticals. Although in wide use, ammonia is both caustic and hazardous.

**Secondary pollutants include:** Particulates created from gaseous primary pollutants and compounds in photochemical smog. Smog is a kind of air pollution; the word "smog" is a portmanteau of smoke and fog. Classic smog results from large amounts of coal burning in an area caused by a mixture of smoke and sulfur dioxide. Modern smog does not usually come from coal but from vehicular and industrial emissions that are acted on in the atmosphere by ultraviolet light from the sun to form secondary pollutants that also combine with the primary emissions to form photochemical smog.

Ground level ozone ( $\text{O}_3$ ) formed from  $\text{NO}_x$  and VOCs. Ozone ( $\text{O}_3$ ) is a key constituent of the troposphere. It is also an important constituent of certain regions of the stratosphere commonly known as the Ozone layer. Photochemical and chemical reactions involving it drive many of the chemical processes that

occur in the atmosphere by day and by night. At abnormally high concentrations brought about by human activities (largely the combustion of fossil fuel), it is a pollutant, and a constituent of smog.

Peroxyacetyl nitrate (PAN) - similarly formed from NO<sub>x</sub> and VOCs.

**Minor air pollutants include:** A large number of minor hazardous air pollutants. Some of these are regulated in USA under the Clean Air Act and in Europe under the Air Framework Directive.

**A variety of persistent organic pollutants, which can attach to particulates:** Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) are organic compounds that are resistant to environmental degradation through chemical, biological, and photolytic processes. Because of this, they have been observed to persist in the environment, to be capable of long-range transport, bioaccumulate in human and animal tissue, biomagnify in food chains, and to have potential significant impacts on human health and the environment.

**Anthropogenic sources (human activity)** mostly related to burning different kinds of fuel

"Stationary Sources" include smoke stacks of power plants, manufacturing facilities (factories) and waste incinerators, as well as furnaces and other types of fuel-burning heating devices. In developing and poor countries, traditional biomass burning is the major source of air pollutants; traditional biomass includes wood, crop waste and dung.

"Mobile Sources" include motor vehicles, marine vessels, aircraft and the effect of sound etc.

Chemicals, dust and controlled burn practices in agriculture and forestry management. Controlled or prescribed burning is a technique sometimes used in forest management, farming, prairie restoration or greenhouse gas abatement. Fire is a natural part of both forest and grassland ecology and controlled fire can be a tool for foresters. Controlled burning stimulates the germination of some desirable forest trees, thus renewing the forest.

Fumes from paint, hair spray, varnish, aerosol sprays and other solvents

Waste deposition in landfills, which generate methane. Methane is highly flammable and may form explosive mixtures with air. Methane is also an asphyxiant and may displace oxygen in an enclosed space. Asphyxia or suffocation may result if the oxygen concentration is reduced to below 19.5% by displacement.

Military, such as nuclear weapons, toxic gases, germ warfare and rocketry

#### **Natural sources**

Dust from natural sources, usually large areas of land with little or no vegetation

Methane, emitted by the digestion of food by animals, for example cattle

Radon gas from radioactive decay within the Earth's crust. Radon is a colorless, odorless, naturally occurring, radioactive noble gas that is formed from the decay of radium. It is considered to be a health hazard. Radon gas from natural sources can accumulate in buildings, especially in confined areas such as the basement and it is the second most frequent cause of lung cancer, after cigarette smoking.

1. Smoke and carbon monoxide from wildfires
2. Vegetation, in some regions, emits environmentally significant amounts of VOCs on warmer days. These VOCs react with primary anthropogenic pollutants—specifically, NO<sub>x</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>, and anthropogenic organic carbon compounds—to produce a seasonal haze of secondary pollutants.
3. Volcanic activity, which produce sulfur, chlorine, and ash particulates

Air pollutant emission factors are representative values that people attempt to relate the quantity of a pollutant released to the ambient air with an activity associated with the release of that pollutant. These factors are usually expressed as the weight of pollutant divided by a unit weight, volume, distance, or duration of the activity emitting the pollutant (e.g., kilograms of particulate emitted per tonne of coal burned). Such factors facilitate estimation of emissions from various sources of air pollution. In most cases, these factors are simply averages of all available data of acceptable quality, and are generally assumed to be representative of long-term averages.

There are 12 compounds in the list of POPs. Dioxins and furans are two of them and are intentionally created by combustion of organics, like open burning of plastics. The POPs are also endocrine disruptor and can mutate the human genes.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency has published a compilation of air pollutant emission factors for a multitude of industrial sources. The United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and many other countries have published similar compilations, as well as the European Environment Agency.

**Health effects:** Air pollution is a significant risk factor for multiple health conditions including respiratory infections, heart disease, and lung cancer, according to the WHO. The health effects caused by air pollution may include difficulty in breathing, wheezing, coughing and aggravation of existing respiratory and cardiac conditions. These effects can result in increased medication use, increased doctor or emergency room visits, more hospital admissions and premature death. The human health effects of poor air quality are far reaching,

but principally affect the body's respiratory system and the cardiovascular system. Individual reactions to air pollutants depend on the type of pollutant a person is exposed to, the degree of exposure, the individual's health status and genetics.

The most common sources of air pollution include particulates, ozone, nitrogen dioxide, and sulfur dioxide. Both indoor and outdoor air pollution have caused approximately 3.3 million deaths worldwide. Children aged less than five years that live in developing countries are the most vulnerable population in terms of total deaths attributable to indoor and outdoor air pollution.

The World Health Organization states that 2.4 million people die each year from causes directly attributable to air pollution, with 1.5 million of these deaths attributable to indoor air pollution. "Epidemiological studies suggest that more than 500,000 Americans die each year from cardiopulmonary disease linked to breathing fine particle air pollution. . ." A study by the University of Birmingham has shown a strong correlation between pneumonia related deaths and air pollution from motor vehicles. Worldwide more deaths per year are linked to air pollution than to automobile accidents. A 2005 study by the European Commission calculated that air pollution reduces life expectancy by an average of almost nine months across the European Union. Causes of deaths include aggravated asthma, emphysema, lung and heart diseases, and respiratory allergies. The US EPA estimates that a proposed set of changes in diesel engine technology could result in 12,000 fewer *premature mortalities*, 15,000 fewer heart attacks, 6,000 fewer emergency room visits by children with asthma, and 8,900 fewer respiratory-related hospital admissions each year in the United States.

The US EPA estimates allowing a ground-level ozone concentration of 65 parts per billion, would avert 1,700 to 5,100 premature deaths nationwide in 2020 compared with the current 75-ppb standard. The agency projects the stricter standard would also prevent an additional 26,000 cases of aggravated asthma and more than a million cases of missed work or school.

The worst short term civilian pollution crisis in India was the 1984 Bhopal Disaster. Leaked industrial vapours from the Union Carbide factory, belonging to Union Carbide, Inc., U.S.A., killed more than 25,000 people outright and injured anywhere from 150,000 to 600,000. The United Kingdom suffered its worst air pollution event when the December 4 Great Smog of 1952 formed over London. In six days more than 4,000 died, and 8,000 more died within the following months. An accidental leak of anthrax spores from a biological warfare laboratory in the former USSR in 1979 near Sverdlovsk is believed to have been the cause of hundreds of civilian deaths. The worst single incident of air pollution to occur in the US occurred in Donora, Pennsylvania in late October, 1948, when 20 people died and over 7,000 were injured.

A new economic study of the health impacts and associated costs of air pollution in the Los Angeles Basin and San Joaquin Valley of Southern California shows that more than 3800 people die prematurely (approximately 14 years earlier than normal) each year because air pollution levels violate federal standards. The number of annual premature deaths is considerably higher than the fatalities related to auto collisions in the same area, which average fewer than 2,000 per year.

Diesel exhaust (DE) is a major contributor to combustion derived particulate matter air pollution. In several human experimental studies, using a well validated exposure chamber setup, DE has been linked to acute vascular dysfunction and increased thrombus formation. This serves as a plausible mechanistic link between the previously described association between particulates air pollution and increased cardiovascular morbidity and mortality.

**Effects on cardiovascular health:** A 2007 review of evidence found ambient air pollution exposure is a risk factor correlating with increased total mortality from cardiovascular events (range: 12% to 14% per a 10 microg/m<sup>3</sup> increase). Air pollution is also emerging as a risk factor for stroke, particularly in developing countries where pollutant levels are highest. A 2007 study found that in women air pollution is associated not with hemorrhagic but with ischemic stroke. Air pollution was also found to be associated with increased incidence and mortality from coronary stroke in a cohort study in 2011.

#### **Effects on cystic fibrosis**

Main article: Cystic fibrosis

A study from around the years of 1999 to 2000, by the University of Washington, showed that patients near and around particulates air pollution had an increased risk of pulmonary exacerbations and decrease in lung function. Patients were examined before the study for amounts of specific pollutants like *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* or *Burkholderiacenocepacia* as well as their socioeconomic standing. Participants involved in the study were located in the United States in close proximity to an Environmental Protection Agency. During the time of the study 117 deaths were associated with air pollution. Many patients in the study lived in or near large metropolitan areas in order to be close to medical help. These same patients had higher level of

pollutants found in their system because of more emissions in larger cities. As cystic fibrosis patients already suffer from decreased lung function, everyday pollutants such as smoke, emissions from automobiles, tobacco smoke and improper use of indoor heating devices could further compromise lung function.

### **Effects on COPD and asthma**

Main article: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) includes diseases such as chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Researches have demonstrated increased risk of developing asthma and COPD from increased exposure to traffic-related air pollution. Additionally, air pollution has been associated with increased hospitalizations and mortality from asthma and COPD.

A study conducted in 1960-1961 in the wake of the Great Smog of 1952 compared 293 London residents with 477 residents of Gloucester, Peterborough, and Norwich, three towns with low reported death rates from chronic bronchitis. All subjects were male postal truck drivers aged 40 to 59. Compared to the subjects from the outlying towns, the London subjects exhibited more severe respiratory symptoms (including cough, phlegm, and dyspnea), reduced lung function (FEV<sub>1</sub> and peak flow rate), and increased sputum production and purulence. The differences were more pronounced for subjects aged 50 to 59. The study controlled for age and smoking habits, so concluded that air pollution was the most likely cause of the observed differences.

It is believed that much like cystic fibrosis, by living in a more urban environment serious health hazards become more apparent. Studies have shown that in urban areas patients suffer mucushypersecretion, lower levels of lung function, and more self diagnosis of chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

### **Links to cancer**

A review of evidence regarding whether ambient air pollution exposure is a risk factor for cancer in 2007 found solid data to conclude that long-term exposure to PM2.5 (fine particulates) increases the overall risk of nonaccidental mortality by 6% per a 10 microg/m<sup>3</sup> increase. PMID 19235364

Exposure to PM2.5 was also associated with an increased risk of mortality from lung cancer (range: 15% to 21% per a 10 microg/m<sup>3</sup> increase) and total cardiovascular mortality (range: 12% to 14% per a 10 microg/m<sup>3</sup> increase). PMID 19235364

The review further noted that living close to busy traffic appears to be associated with elevated risks of these three outcomes (increase in lung cancer deaths, cardiovascular deaths, and overall nonaccidental deaths. PMID 19235364

The reviewers also found suggestive evidence that exposure to PM2.5 is positively associated with mortality from coronary heart diseases and exposure to SO<sub>2</sub> increases mortality from lung cancer, but the data was insufficient to provide solid conclusions.

In 2011, a large Danish epidemiological study found an increased risk of lung cancer for patients who lived in areas with high nitrogen oxide concentrations. In this study, the association was higher for non-smokers than smokers. An additional Danish study, also in 2011, likewise noted evidence of possible associations between air pollution and other forms of cancer, including cervical cancer and brain cancer.

### **Effects on children**

Around the world, children living in cities with high exposure to air pollutants are at increased risk of developing asthma, pneumonia and other lower respiratory infections. Because children are outdoors more and have higher minute ventilation they are more susceptible to the dangers of air pollution. Risks of low initial birth weight are also heightened in such cities.

The World Health Organization reports that the greatest concentrations of particulates are found in countries with low economic world power and high poverty and population growth rates. Examples of these countries include Egypt, Sudan, Mongolia, and Indonesia. However even in the United States, despite the passage of the Clean Air Act in 1970, in 2002 at least 146 million Americans were living in non-attainment areas—regions in which the concentration of certain air pollutants exceeded federal standards. These dangerous pollutants are known as the criteria pollutants, and include ozone, particulates, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, and lead.

Protective measures to ensure children's health are being taken in cities such as New Delhi, India where buses now use compressed natural gas to help eliminate the "pea-soup" smog.

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