

Physician Surveys on Climate Change and Health



Researchers at [George Mason University's Center for Climate Change Communication](#) have surveyed physicians on their experiences and understanding of climate change and its health impacts. Below are findings from surveys of the National Medical Association (NMA),¹ the American Thoracic Society (ATS)² and the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI).³

Through these surveys, the researchers asked over 2300 physicians across the U.S. whether they think climate change is happening, whether it is human caused, and whether it is impacting the health of their patients *now*. The results are striking - a large proportion of all physicians surveyed see the impacts of climate change on patients' health, through a variety of pathways. NMA respondents report the highest level of impact, perhaps because NMA physicians have patients that are more likely to reside in urban areas and be low-income and non-white and therefore experience existing inequities and greater vulnerability to climate-related events. In addition, 50% of the NMA sample were primary care doctors, who are more likely to observe climate related health impacts.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH	NMA Response N=284/30%	ATS Response N=915/17%	AAAAI Response N=1184/22%
Climate change is happening.	97%	89%	80%
Climate change is human caused.	62%	68%	76%
Climate change is affecting my patients.	79%	73%	74%
My patients are affected by climate change through:			
Severe weather-related injuries	88%	57%	49%
Increase in chronic disease related to air pollution	88%	77%	73%
Increase in allergy symptoms	80%	58%	63%
Heat related illness	75%	48%	34%
Vector-borne illness	58%	40%	36%
Food and waterborne illness	56%	26%	23%

- *With the aging of the population, the incidence of heat strokes has risen in my practice area.*

- *I had a high-school patient who suffered heat stroke while playing football in extremely hot weather.*
- *I have a patient who has environmental allergies that are usually treated with antihistamines. They now have to use steroid inhalers and bronchodilators at times.*

A higher percentage of physicians are seeing climate change impacts and think it's important. Physicians from all groups believe that they should play a role in educating patients and the public on the health impacts of climate change.



ROLE OF PHYSICIANS IN CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH	NMA Response N=284/30%	ATS Response N=915/17%	AAAAI Response N=1184/22%
Physicians should:			
Inform patients about the health impacts of climate change	75%	62%	56%
Inform the public about the health impacts of climate change	71%	72%	56%
Have leadership roles in encouraging environmentally sustainable clinics, hospitals and offices	81%	80%	70%
Medical associations should play an advocacy role in climate change and health issues	76%	75%	61%

- *In my practice setting in DC/MD, the climate has been severe and unpredictable and I feel that as a result the viral illnesses have been much more debilitating. Previously relatively benign viruses are now more often causing severe illness in both inpatient and outpatient settings.*

Barriers and resources for physicians on climate change

While most physicians reported that they are at least modestly knowledgeable about the association between climate change and health, many reported significant barriers to taking action, including:

- Lack of time
- Not sure how to talk to patients about this issue
- Lack of resources and recommendations for patients
- Non-billable activities



- *My patient experienced atrocities during Hurricane Katrina. As a result, she had PTSD and severe depression that prevented her from holding a stable job.*
- *My practice works with injury and the area in which I work has been affected by increased flooding and increased snowfall which has increased episodes of back injury from snow and water removal.*
- *I have more patients with asthma and allergies coming in with flares earlier and earlier in the year because pollen is produced earlier and earlier.*

The surveys identified specific resources that would assist physicians in addressing climate change and health, including:

- Educational opportunities, such as webinars, podcasts, or Continuing Medical Education units on climate change
- Patient education materials and resources, as well as training on how to talk to patients about these issues
- Policy Statements from professional medical and health associations
- Advocacy events, such as public and community forums, opportunities for political action, public service announcements

To view the full reports, please visit:

- NMA Report: <http://climatechangecommunication.org/all/a-survey-of-african-american-physicians-on-the-health-effects-of-climate-change/>
- ATS Report: <http://climatechangecommunication.org/reports/final-version-ats-report/>
- AAAAI Report: <http://climatechangecommunication.org/all/views-of-allergy-specialists-on-the-health-effects-of-climate-change-2/>

“ Citations

- ¹ Safaty, M., Mitchell, M., Bloodhart, B., Berg, C., & Maibach, E. (2014). Key findings National Medical Association Physician Survey. *George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication*.
- ² Safaty, M., Bloodhart, B., Ewart, G., Thurston, G., Balmes, J., Guidotti, T., & Maibach, E. (2015). American Thoracic Society member survey on climate change and health. *Annals of the American Thoracic Society*, 12(2), 274-278.
- ³ Safaty, M., Kreslake, J., Bloodhart, B., Price, K., Canale, T., Folstein, S. & Maibach, E. (2015). Views of allergy specialists on the health effects of climate change. *George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication*.

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