

Is climate change increasing substance abuse?

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We knew that climate change and its effects—natural disasters, pandemics, pollution—are negatively impacting mental and physical health around the world. Now a new [study](#) published in *Perspectives on*

Psychological Science sheds light on another health impact of climate change: increased substance abuse.

The literature review was conducted by an international research team that included Dr. Nicholas Chadi, a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Pediatrics at Université de Montréal and a clinician-scientist specializing in adolescent and addiction medicine at Sainte-Justine hospital.

"Our study is a narrative synthesis that identifies the possible links between [climate change](#) and substance abuse," explained Chadi. "We hope it will guide future research on specific age cohorts and settings in order to empirically test our hypotheses."

'A confluence of complex stressors'

The researchers found there are many ways in which climate change could increase harmful substance use and vulnerability to relapse. They identified the following five pathways, which could operate independently, additively, interactively or cumulatively:

- [psychosocial stress](#) arising from the destabilization of social, environmental, economic and geopolitical support systems
- increased rates of mental disorders
- increased physical-health burdens
- incremental harmful changes to established behavior patterns
- worry about the dangers of unchecked climate change

Chadi specified that the fourth pathway, changes to established behavior patterns, refers to substance use as a coping mechanism. "Climate change can create conditions that reduce access to housing, education, recreation and healthy food," he explained. "People then turn to substances to cope with the stress, unwind or occupy their time."

Climate change can also increase rates of mental disorders, including what's known as climate anxiety as well as other anxiety disorders and depression. All of these conditions can lead to self-medication as a way of coping with stress, uncertainty about the future, grief over loss of cherished landscapes, the trauma of losing a home, and more.

Chadi also pointed out that [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), in this case caused by [natural disasters](#), is one of the greatest risk factors for substance use as a way to alleviate distress.

Young people especially vulnerable

Young people have their whole future ahead of them, and it's a future in which climate change looms large. This puts them at greater risk for substance abuse. "Adolescence is naturally a time of looking ahead and making life plans," said Chadi. "Knowing that things could get a lot worse and that you may be prevented from achieving your goals and aspirations can create pessimism and hopelessness, which can lead to [substance abuse](#)."

The same is true for [physical health](#). If a child suffers from a climate-related illness, the effects are only going to accumulate over time and further undermine psychological well-being.

"In my work as a pediatrician specializing in [mental health](#), I witness psychological distress in [young people](#) quite frequently," reported Chadi. "They know things are going to get worse and they wonder what the point is of going on. They really do say this."

Given this harsh reality and his study's findings, Chadi stresses the importance of investing in prevention and health promotion. He advocates strategies that help people reduce their carbon footprint while also improving their mental health and well-being, such as promoting

active transit, dietary changes and policy changes.

"Substance abuse is a societal problem that's already costing us billions of dollars annually and the climate crisis is only going to make it worse," said Chadi. "Policymakers, [community leaders](#), researchers, [health professionals](#) and the public must all become more aware and more engaged if we are to respond effectively to these new challenges. It's urgent."

More information: Francis Vergunst et al, Climate Change and Substance-Use Behaviors: A Risk-Pathways Framework, *Perspectives on Psychological Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/17456916221132739](https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221132739)

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