

'Urgent and sustainable' action needed to safeguard health, according to new report on health and climate change

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A focus on heat and health, and decarbonization of the health sector, are among the key implications of the latest [report](#) of the MJA–Lancet

Countdown on health and climate change, published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Despite documenting some promising progress on climate change and health, Australia's leading scientists behind this year's report call for urgent and sustainable action to safeguard against the health impacts of climate change.

"We are in an era of important milestones for climate and health with some promising progress with Australia's National Health and Climate Strategy launched in December 2023, and the United Nations COP 28 climate negotiations giving health professionals a seat at the table. However, there is no denying that climate projections for the future are still looking bleak," said Dr. Aditya Vyas, Lancet Countdown Oceania Fellow at the University of Sydney.

"New data available in the 2023 MJA–Lancet Countdown report provides the answer to achieving the ambitions of international climate negotiations and national legislation, showing the areas that the Oceania region must focus on."

In particular, the authors are calling on Australian health organizations, and the health practitioners who work in these organizations, to show accountability for reducing the 29 megatons of greenhouse gas emissions they generate each year.

The authors also call on governments and [health authorities](#) to urgently develop and implement evidence-based heat and health action plans after the report documents a 24% increase in the average number of hours people exceed the heat risk stress threshold annually across Australia.

They state that this has significant implications for how people go about their daily work and leisure activities. Under moderate heat stress risk situations, the duration of sporting activities for example would need to be shortened or rest breaks increased, to avoid heat illness.

About the MJA-Lancet Countdown

The 6th edition of the report, The 2023 report of the MJA–Lancet Countdown on health and climate change for the first time focuses on Oceania as a whole. It draws on the expertise of 14 institutions from Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Vietnam, in partnership with University College London, to provide the most up-to-date assessment of climate and health in Australia.

Lead author of the report, Associate Professor Paul Beggs from Macquarie University, said this edition is the most important so far.

"The 2023 MJA–Lancet Countdown report highlights some significant steps forward in Australia's response to the health and climate change crisis, but it also concludes that urgent and substantial further action is required to safeguard Australia and the health of its people," he said.

Professor Ollie Jay, Director of the University of Sydney's Heat and Health Research Incubator and an author on the global Lancet Countdown report, said the planet is warming at an unprecedented rate and Australia is especially susceptible to severe and extended bouts of extreme heat.

"It is important that we think carefully about the way in which we undertake the required transition away from fossil fuels to ensure that everybody pays their fair share, and that the burden of adaptation doesn't fall disproportionately on those who can least afford it," he said.

New insights from the 2023 report

Over the last 30 years there has been a 24% increase in the average number of annual hours a person exceeds the heat stress risk threshold in Australia.

Severe flooding across the four eastern states of Australia in 2022 resulted in insured losses of \$7.168 billion—the highest ever recorded—and higher than the insurance payments in 2019–20 summer due to bushfires, floods and hailstorms combined.

Coal still accounts for two-thirds of domestic energy production in Australia, one-third of total energy supply, and over half of electricity generation—a decrease from 80% in 2005. Only 1,500 organizations worldwide have committed to fossil fuel divestment; however, in 2022, only 215 new organizations divested from fossil fuels in Australia, and only two of these are health organizations.

Recommendations

Following on from the report's assessment, the authors are calling on communities, governments, industry and health systems to focus on:

1. Building resilience against the health impacts of climate change

Heat and heat wave are a critical example, a silent killer which has claimed more lives than any other natural hazard in Australia. This needs governments and health authorities to develop nuanced and inclusive heat and health action plans that address the different settings where people work, live and play.

2. Stopping funding to the fossil fuel industry

The World Health Organization (WHO) has strongly advocated for an end to fossil fuel use "in the name of health," describing continued extraction and burning of fossil fuels as "an act of self-sabotage." As previous research has indicated, the health sector has a significant role to play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Every health practitioner and researcher can also act in their individual capacity by advocating for their employer to divest from [fossil fuels](#).

3. Recognizing the hard limits to adapting to climate change

Australia goes through cycles of drought and flooding, and the economic and societal impact is becoming more frequent and more damaging due to climate change. The MJA–Lancet Countdown has documented this drought-to-flood cycle in full with its six annual reports published since 2018.

4. Rapidly increasing renewable energy generation

Australia has recently made rapid progress on increasing the share of renewable energy in electricity production, going from 17% in 2018 to 36% in 2022. However, as insights listed above recognize, coal still plays a significant role in domestic energy production, supply and generation.

"The 2023 [report](#) of The MJA–Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: sustainability needed in Australia's health care sector" tracks the links between public health and [climate change](#) for 25 indicators across five domains: health hazards, exposures, and impacts; adaptation, planning, and resilience for health; mitigation actions and health co-benefits; economics and finance; and public and political engagement.

More information: Paul J Beggs et al, The 2023 report of the MJA–Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: sustainability needed in Australia's health care sector, *Medical Journal of Australia* (2024). [DOI: 10.5694/mja2.52245](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.52245)

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