

Pollution and health: A progress update

Key Messages

1. Over the past two decades, deaths caused by the modern forms of pollution (eg, ambient air pollution and toxic chemical pollution) have increased by 66%, driven by industrialisation, uncontrolled urbanisation, population growth, fossil fuel combustion, and an absence of adequate national or international chemical policy.
2. Despite declines in deaths from household air and water pollution, pollution still causes more than 9 million deaths each year globally. This number has not changed since 2015.
3. More than 90% of pollution-related deaths occur in low-income and middle-income countries.
4. Key areas in which focus is needed include air pollution, lead poisoning, and chemical pollution. Air pollution causes over 6.5 million deaths each year globally, and this number is increasing. Lead and other chemicals are responsible for 1.8 million deaths each year globally, which is probably an undercounted figure.
5. Most countries have done little to deal with this enormous public health problem. Although high-income countries have controlled their worst forms of pollution and linked pollution control to climate change mitigation, only a few low-income and middle-income countries have been able to make pollution a priority, devoted resources to pollution control, or made progress. Likewise, pollution control receives little attention in either official development assistance or global philanthropy.
6. The triad of pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss are the key global environmental issues of our time. These issues are intricately linked and solutions to each will benefit the others. • We cannot continue to ignore pollution. We are going backwards.