



# Communicating on **climate change** **and health**

## Toolkit for health professionals





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## **Toolkit for health professionals**

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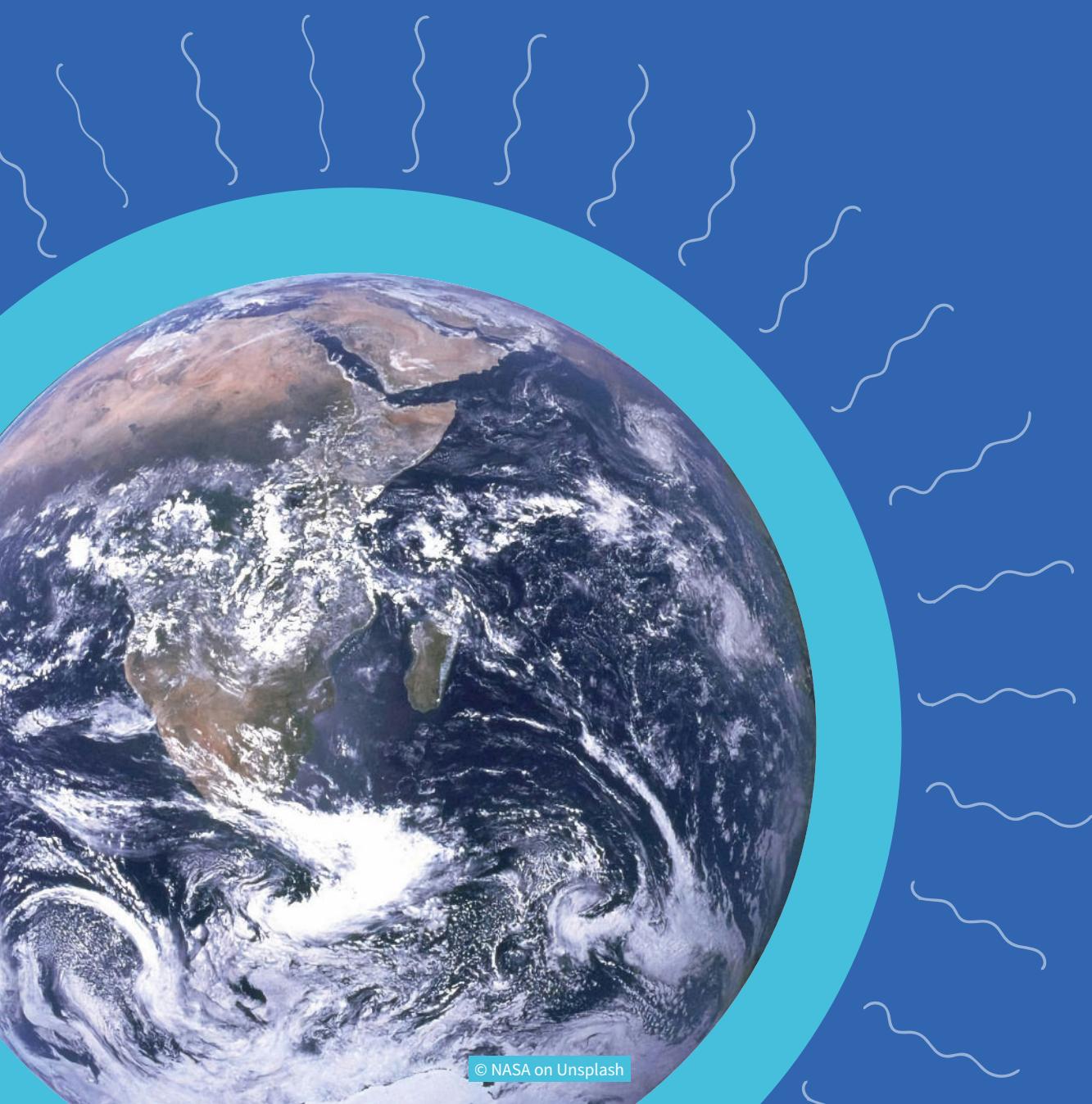
# Acknowledgements

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Written by Remy Shergill and Shreya Shrikhande, with significant support from Marina Maiero and Alexandra Egorova.

\*Credit to Dr Ed Maibach, Director of the Center for Climate Change Communication, George Mason University

The material in this toolkit is informed by a literature review (part of an ongoing project), and several consultation sessions with communication experts and end users.



## This toolkit will help you become an effective and powerful climate communicator

Is this toolkit for me?



Are you a **health professional** who is:

Concerned about climate change?



Keen to talk to people about climate change?



Yes

Yes

This toolkit is intended to be used by any health professional – doctors, nurses, allied health practitioners, public health officials, health researchers, students and more.



If so, you already have **everything you need** to be an **effective and powerful climate communicator**.

Why?

As a **health professional**, you are **uniquely qualified** to talk about climate change and health.



?  
If you're not talking about climate change, why not? Are you hesitant because:

You can't explain the greenhouse effect to another person?



You haven't read the latest report?



You aren't a climate scientist?



**Don't worry, you don't need to be a climate expert. You can talk about climate change in a way that is powerful, easy and effective.**



**This toolkit is the first step to communicating about climate change and health.**

**“Saving the planet  
is no longer just a  
scientific challenge  
but a **communications**  
**challenge”****

– Sir David Attenborough

**“Through dialogue and  
action, health and care  
workers can safeguard  
human health and  
ensure a **resilient and**  
**sustainable future.”****

– Dr Maria Neira



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Three terms you  
should know before  
reading the toolkit





# 01

## Climate change

When we talk about **climate change** in this toolkit, we are talking about the changes in the climate over the last 150 years. Rising greenhouse gas emissions are causing temperatures to increase globally, leading to broad changes in our climate. Burning fossil fuels is the main source of greenhouse gas emissions.

# 02

## Climate solutions

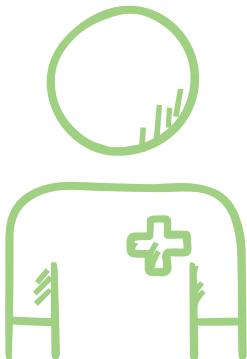
When we talk about **climate solutions** in this toolkit, we are talking about the knowledge and technology we already have to slow down climate change and limit its harms. Mitigation and adaptation are two types of climate solutions.

To slow down climate change, governments, businesses and industry, organizations, and households must reduce greenhouse gas emissions in our atmosphere and stop using fossil fuels – coal, oil, and gas. Actions to slow climate change are known as mitigation. An example of mitigation is heating and lighting our homes using renewable energy, rather than coal and gas.

To limit the harms of climate change, governments, agencies and organizations must implement initiatives which help people cope with the health harms of climate change (also known as adaptation). An example of adaptation would be preparing a hospital for a surge of patients during extreme weather events.

There are many climate solutions which can differ between communities and countries, depending on what is economically, socially and culturally feasible. Some examples:

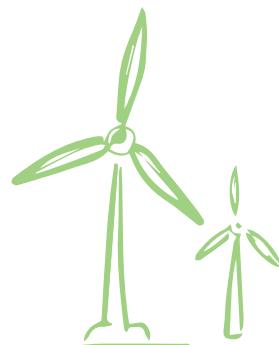
- Using renewable energy to power cities and transport
- Eating more plant-based foods
- Protecting forests and oceans, which absorb some greenhouse gases
- And more!



# 03

## Health professionals\*

When we talk about **health professionals** in this toolkit, we are talking about anyone who works in the healthcare sector or sciences. This includes (but is not limited to) doctors, nurses, allied health practitioners, mental health practitioners, public health professionals, community health workers, health promotion professionals, researchers and more.



\* In this toolkit, the term 'health professional' is comparable to the WHO definition of 'health and care workers'. Health and care workers are all those who are engaged in actions with the primary intent of enhancing health, including those who provide direct personal care services in the home, in health care and residential settings, and those occupations in academic, management and scientific roles, such as health researchers and health managers.



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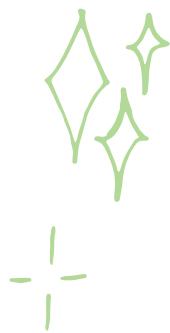
# Executive summary



Climate change is the biggest health threat of the 21st century. For many people, the negative health effects of climate change are already here.

While climate change is a big threat to health, implementing solutions to address climate change presents a huge opportunity to promote better health and protect people from climate-sensitive diseases.

Communicating the health risks of climate change and the health benefits of climate solutions is both necessary and helpful. Health professionals are well-placed to play a unique role in helping their communities to understand climate change, protect themselves, and realize the health benefits of climate solutions.



# Why we made this toolkit



Currently, many health professionals and health workers don't feel comfortable talking about climate change and health. This is despite their concerns about the harmful health impacts of climate change and their established track record as health communicators. This toolkit, with its supporting resources, aims to bridge the gaps between concern, knowledge and action.

The toolkit can be used by any health professional or health worker who wants to talk about climate change. Health professionals can help their communities understand how climate change will affect their health, and how to protect themselves. Health professionals can also explain the vast health benefits that come with implementing climate solutions, like cleaner air, cooler cities and communities who are prepared for extreme weather.

**Please note:** the toolkit has been informed by the existing evidence base, which is heavily skewed towards knowledge from the Global North. The World Health Organization has tried to address this by consulting with health professionals and communication experts from around the world.

More research is needed urgently to better understand best practice climate-health communication throughout diverse global geographies.

## This toolkit was developed to help you:



Understand the health impacts of climate change, and how climate action delivers important health benefits



Build your confidence to communicate about climate change as a health professional or health worker



Communicate with confidence to peers, patients, clients, communities, journalists, policymakers, politicians and other stakeholders



Empower your patients, clients and communities to take measures that will help limit climate change and protect their health and wellbeing in a warming climate

# Why health professionals should talk

## about climate

## change

**Climate change is the biggest health threat of the 21st century**

Our world is warming rapidly with devastating consequences. Climate change is linked to extreme weather events, water and food security challenges, poor air quality and more.<sup>1</sup> See more in ‘[Basics of climate science](#)’.



© Climate and Health Alliance

# Health effects of climate change

Climate change affects health both directly (through extreme weather, air pollution and more) and indirectly (by affecting the social and environmental determinants of health, like nutrition, healthcare access, etc). **Some examples:**

Almost the entire global population (99%) breathes unhealthy air pollution, which mainly comes from burning fossil fuels. Air pollution is linked to many diseases, including asthma, lung cancer, strokes and more<sup>4</sup>

Heatwaves have been linked to a wide range of adverse health effects, including heart attacks, kidney disease, cardio-respiratory diseases, decreased mental wellbeing, and even death<sup>3</sup>

Changing weather patterns and extreme weather events can reduce crop yields, potentially leading to food insecurity and malnutrition<sup>1</sup>

Climate change is associated with increased water scarcity and contamination, leading to violent competition for scarce resources, forced migration and conflict.

The geographic range and breeding window for mosquito-borne disease is broadening due to changing weather patterns<sup>1</sup>

Climate change has been linked to adverse mental health impacts for various reasons, such as extreme heat, trauma from extreme weather events, loss of livelihoods and culture, and anxiety about the future<sup>1</sup>

## Strengthening our healthcare systems

Demand for healthcare services will increase as the health effects of climate change become more pronounced. At the same time, healthcare systems are being affected by climate change themselves, via extreme weather, supply chain disruptions and more.

After a pandemic, an energy crisis and a cost-of-living crisis, global health systems have been described as “a debilitated first line of defense” by the Lancet Countdown.<sup>5</sup> Health systems are strained, and may become “overwhelmed” by the impacts of climate change.<sup>6</sup>

The good news is, there are many solutions to strengthening our health systems to respond to climate change. [Read the Operational framework for building climate resilient and low carbon health systems by the World Health Organization.](#)

# Climate change is affecting our health today

Climate change is here, now, and already affecting people’s health. The health risks due to climate change are not equitable between and within regions and communities and contribute to major social inequalities in health.

Everyone is susceptible to the harms of climate change, but some groups of people are more vulnerable than others<sup>1</sup>.



Which of the following do you think are more susceptible than average?



- Elderly people
- Infants and children
- Indigenous Peoples
- People in low-lying and coastal areas
- Women, especially pregnant women
- Smallholder farmers, pastoralists, fishing communities
- People who are experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage or unsafe housing
- People with pre-existing health conditions
- People who work outdoors in hot climates

**That's right! All these groups are more susceptible.**

# Climate action is an opportunity to improve health and wellbeing

Good news! The health benefits of implementing climate solutions are immense. Policies and interventions designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and mitigate climate change also have the potential to reduce health inequity, build community resilience, and protect and promote better health<sup>7</sup>.

For example, many climate solutions (clean energy and transport, protecting nature, urban greening) rapidly produce health benefits to the local community who has implemented them<sup>1</sup>:



Improved air quality



Increased physical activity



Improved mental health



Reduced urban heat effect

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions pays for itself. For every dollar spent, approximately \$2 are saved in health costs.<sup>8</sup>



**Around 5% of global emissions come from the health sector.<sup>5</sup>** When health systems implement climate solutions and shift to clean energy, it both reduces their contribution to global emissions, and improves their capacity to manage disruptions from extreme weather events, pandemics and other health crises.

Other adaptation solutions within the health system include developing early warning systems, improving health system preparedness for extreme events, public education and awareness.

# Health professionals can be effective champions for climate solutions

Health professionals wear many hats in society – one of which is a trusted community voice. This means that a health professional is well-positioned to communicate in ways that help protect human health from climate change.

The health effects of climate change are rapidly becoming more obvious in communities. It's important to be informed with the latest evidence on critical health issues, like climate change, to deliver effective healthcare.



The evidence is clear: health professionals can make a difference by talking about climate change<sup>9</sup>

## A 2023 review summarized the evidence:



Talking about climate change as a health issue has considerable potential to build public support for climate solutions



Health professionals are highly trusted to talk about climate and health



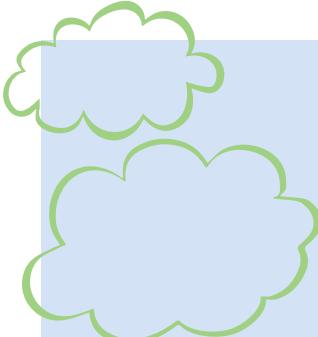
Many health professionals are willing to talk about climate change, and engage in climate advocacy



The existing evidence supports the unique role that health professionals have in building support for climate action



## Basics of climate science



Methane



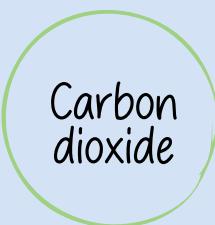
Water vapour



The  
greenhouse  
gases



Nitrous  
oxide



Carbon  
dioxide



Ozone



There is conclusive scientific evidence showing that greenhouse gas emissions are warming the globe, leading to an accelerated pace of climate change. The past 10 years have been the warmest on record, and the average surface temperature is already more than 1.1°C high than pre-industrial times.

Over the last four decades, tens of thousands of peer-reviewed scientific articles have been published on climate change. Periodically, these are synthesized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to give a comprehensive review of climate science. This robust scientific process confirms these five points again and again<sup>10</sup>:



It's  
warming



It's us



We're sure



It's  
bad for  
health



We can  
fix it



If you understand these five points, you know enough climate science to be an effective climate communicator.

## How is climate change affecting your community?



Have you noticed any of the following in your community?



Changing frequency and intensity of extreme weather, such as heatwaves, wildfire and smoke, floods, storms, etc



More vector-borne diseases, or new vector-borne diseases  
Vector-borne diseases are carried by mosquitoes, flies, ticks, etc



Distress related to extreme weather events, climate change or losing cultural connection to the land



Changing food and water availability

### What else have you noticed?

The effects of climate change on health will differ vastly, depending on your community's location, infrastructure, socioeconomic status, and more. For more information on how your region will be affected, you can check out:

National, regional or local climate change and health assessments relevant to your area, including the [IPCC national and regional reports](#)



The [ClimaHealth country profiles](#)



# How health professionals should talk



## about climate

## change



### To summarize:

- Climate change is one of the biggest health threats of the 21st century
- Climate change already affects the health and wellbeing of our communities
- The solutions to climate change will deliver substantial positive health benefits
- Health professionals are uniquely positioned to deliver this message!



Now that you know **why** you should be talking about climate change, here's **how** to talk about climate change as a health professional.

**It's powerful, easy and effective.**

# Before you start talking, consider your audience and goal

Considering your audience and goal can help you decide what is useful to say and what isn't.

## **There are all sorts of people you may talk to about climate change and health:**

- Patients and clients
- Colleagues and peers
- Executives in your organization
- Community members in person or online
- Politicians
- Policymakers
- Journalists
- Your friends and family
- A social media following
- And so on

## **With different audiences come different goals. Your goal may be to:**

- Empower a patient to make good decisions about their health
- Convince a colleague to talk about climate change as well
- Persuade a politician of the health impacts of their climate policy
- Reduce climate anxiety in a friend
- Offer a journalist a quote for their article on climate change
- Inform someone in your waiting room
- Encourage social media followers to call their elected representatives
- And so on





# 10 top tips of climate-health communication



01



## Keep your message simple, and repeat it often

The most effective messages are simple and repeated often by trusted sources. By virtue of being a health professional, you're already a trusted source on health. So, pick a simple message, and find ways of repeating it frequently in the conversation. If you're getting tired of saying it, you're doing it right. More on this on page 22.

02



## Focus on human health

Talk about climate change as a health problem rather than as an environmental one. This helps your audience to see climate change as a local, concrete problem rather than an abstract, future problem. Likewise, talking about the health benefits of climate action brings the topic into the present and into your community.

03



## Understand your local context

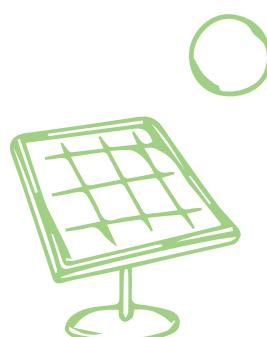
Explain how climate change will affect your own region to help your audience see it as a local, concrete problem. The health impacts of climate change vary widely across the world, from extreme heat exposure, to food insecurity, to novel disease exposure, to mental distress. More on this on page 13.

04



## Don't use jargon

Use simple, accessible language. Jargon and technical terms can confuse or even alienate the person you're talking to. This applies to health jargon and climate jargon. See more in '[Glossary](#)'



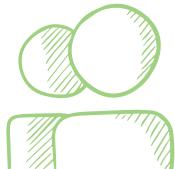
# 05



## **Empower people to make good decisions about their health**

Let people know how they can protect themselves from the impacts of climate change. This empowers them to protect themselves and their families, and may reduce feelings of apathy or anxiety about climate change.

# 07



## **Tell stories to connect with people**

People connect to stories. If you have personal experience witnessing the health effects of climate change, share the story in a respectful way. Many people won't remember scientific facts or statistics – they're more likely to remember stories. More on this on page 23.

An easy way to start is to tell your story: who you are (e.g. a concerned health professional) and why you care (e.g. because you are seeing the health impacts of climate change).

# 09



## **Talk about climate change during extreme weather events**

When appropriate, you can talk about climate change during extreme weather events. These events have been described as “teachable moments” about climate change. At these moments, climate change is likely to feel more tangible to your audience, and become more personally salient and meaningful<sup>11</sup>.

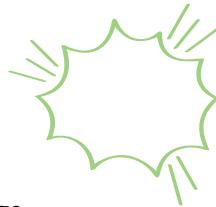
Please note: This can have different results if you're speaking to people who are directly affected by extreme weather. Some people may become more distressed hearing about climate change, while others may find it empowering. Please use discretion.

# 06

## **Talk about the health benefits of climate action**

Let people know that climate action is good for our health. The solutions to climate action include renewable energy, active transport, local plant-rich diets, and protecting green spaces. All these things are also good for our health and wellbeing. [Read more on health benefits.](#)

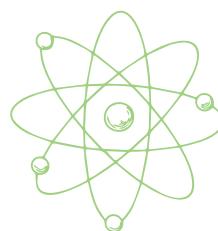
# 08



## **Avoid polarizing language**

In a clinical setting, avoid terms like ‘climate crisis’ or ‘climate emergency’. While you might be very alarmed about climate change – for good reason – painting an image of doom and despair can have unintended effects on your patients. Some people become paralyzed with fear. Some people become desensitized to the claims and skeptical of the science.

# 10



## **Don't debate the science**

Don't get caught up in conversations that question climate science. It's not up for debate. If conversation veers into this territory, redirect it back to your professional expertise and the links between climate change and health.





# Where to start

Talking about climate change doesn't have to be daunting! In fact, it can be really easy. Here are different ways to start out.

## 01 Share written and visual information about climate change at work

- Put brochures or a poster in your waiting room
- Wear a badge at work which says 'Climate action saves lives'

## 02 Share relevant content on your workplace's website

- Find others who are already doing this work
- Google your country and "climate and health" to find out who is already doing this work
- Connect with them — it's the best way to learn

## 03 Practice with trusted colleagues

- Remember you're a health professional who is giving legitimate health advice. If you're intimidated to start, try practicing with those you trust in your networks.

# Case study #1: Flooding conversations in Colombia

In 2019, Dr. Paola Arias was speaking at a symposium on climate change organized by the Risk Management and Climate Change Office in Bogotá when torrential rains caused the ceiling in the next room to collapse and cut off the electricity. Rather than ending the talk, Dr. Arias was encouraged to continue without slides or amplification. She used this opportunity to start discussing the risks and impacts of the climate crisis in society in a more intimate way, thereby connecting better with her audience.

As Bogotá has been built over flood plains, issues around water are a common feature of the inhabitants' lives, this approach allowed her message to better resonate with her audience. It also makes it easier to connect local issues with the global climate crisis.

**[Read the full case study “Flooding conversations in Colombia” by Dr Paola Arias, IPCC co-author<sup>12</sup>](#)**



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# Sample messages around climate change

As a starting point, here are some sample messages to specific audiences.

## Things you could say to a patient

Climate change means heatwaves are becoming more frequent. Here's how heat can affect your cardiovascular system or how your medication can make you more vulnerable to heat.

When cars burn petrol, they emit toxic air pollutants which can exacerbate asthma. Remember to carry an inhaler, and avoid exposure to busy roads where possible.

Anxiety related to climate change is becoming more common among young people. Let's discuss a strategy to support your mental wellbeing.

Climate change is here now. Here is a list of actions you can take to reduce your own personal contribution to climate change.



## Things you could say to a decision-maker in your workplace



Climate change is one of the biggest health threats of the 21st century. As health professionals, our role is to protect people from the health effects of climate change.

Climate change will most affect the health of our more vulnerable patients, like children and elderly people, people experiencing disadvantage, or people with disabilities or chronic illness.

Making our workplace more sustainable will help us become more resilient during extreme weather events, future pandemics and other health crises.

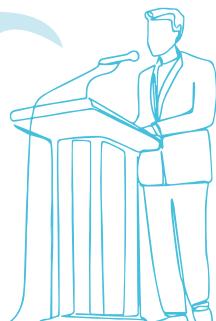
Sustainable healthcare is good for the planet and good for our budget.

## Things you could say to a policymaker

Climate change is here now, and I am already seeing the impacts on my patients' health. The health of some people is affected more severely, including children and elderly people, disadvantaged communities, remote communities, and people with disabilities or chronic illness.

Climate action is a 'win-win-win'. It's good for our health, it's good for the economy and it's good for the environment our community depends on.

We already have the solutions. But we cannot delay in implementing them fully—we must act urgently. Every fraction of a degree matters when it comes to global heating.



# Effective

# storytelling

# is effective

# communication

People's health is affected by climate change and fossil fuels right now.

But people find it hard to connect to statistics and facts, no matter how alarming.



Telling stories can create an emotional connection between your audience and the reality of climate change. People are more likely to recall an informative anecdote than a bunch of statistics.

If you've seen the health effects of climate change firsthand in your work, please share it in a respectful way with your audiences.



**They say pictures are worth a thousand words!**  
**In 2021, Tuvalu's foreign minister Simon Kofe**  
**gave a speech to the UN climate conference in**  
**Glasgow standing knee-deep in seawater to**  
**show how his low-lying Pacific island nation**  
**is on the front line of climate change.**

# Case study #2: Ella's Law

In 2013, Ella Kissi-Debrah died at nine years of age as a result of asthma exacerbated by exposure to excessive air pollution in London.

Ella was the first person in England to have air pollution named as the cause of death by the coroner. The coroner urged the government to take action to bring air quality up to minimum World Health Organization standards.

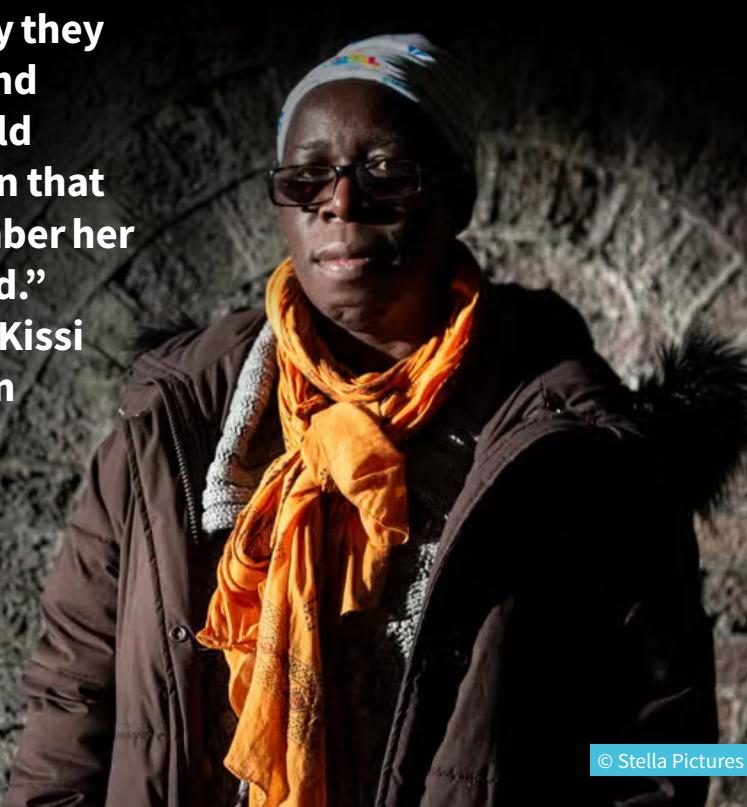
Ella's tragic death became a catalyst for change, led by her mother, Rosamund Adoo Kissi-Debrah. Rosamund, determined to prevent similar losses, transformed Ella's story into a powerful advocacy

movement. Rosamund engaged the public, emphasizing the human right to clean air and framing the issue as one of social justice.

Her communication strategy resonated with the broader public, sparking awareness and garnering support for proposed legislation "Ella's Law" – a poignant tribute.

By sharing Ella's personal tragedy to drive legislative action, Rosamund Adoo Kissi-Debrah effectively turned a heartbreakin loss into a force for positive change, demonstrating the profound impact of communication in advocacy and social movements.

**"Ella used to worry they might forget her and move on. She would love to have known that people will remember her for something good."**  
**– Rosamund Adoo Kissi Debrah, Ella's mum**



© Stella Pictures LTD / Daniel Hambury

# Some common communication challenges – and how to avoid them

**Worldwide, scientists and communications experts have been talking about climate change for a long time, and have come up against some challenges.**

**If you're aware of the challenges, you're more likely to avoid them. Here are some of the most common ones.**

Climate change seems far away in space and time.

This is a common problem, particularly in communities who are not obviously impacted by climate change yet.

Talking about the health impacts of climate change helps to bring climate change into the present as a local, concrete problem. This is particularly effective if you share a firsthand experience you've had with a patient.

Likewise, talking about the health benefits of climate solutions can bring climate change into the present while encouraging people to feel hopeful.

Communicating a vision of doom and despair can paralyze or alienate your audience.

It's common to hear climate change discussed in a way which is grave and even scary. This can have unintended consequences for some audiences:

- They might become fearful or anxious about climate change
- They might become skeptical about climate change, and then disengage

Where possible, communicate positive messages about climate solutions. This helps to engage people and minimize climate anxiety. For instance, the sooner we move to clean energy, the sooner we will all enjoy cleaner air and water, and better health.

Climate action is perceived as detrimental to the economy.

This is an untrue and unhelpful perception held by some people. For a long time, it was repeated by some businesses and governments to delay the implementation of climate solutions. Overall, a proactive approach to tackling climate change will protect human health while also stimulating economic development and long-term financial stability.

For every dollar spent on reducing greenhouse gas emissions, approximately \$2 are saved in health costs.<sup>8</sup>

# Where does this all lead?

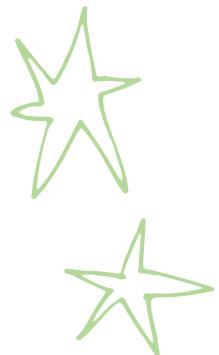
Everytime you talk about climate change and the links to our health and wellbeing, you make it more likely that members of your audience become engaged and active citizens for climate solutions.



**Your efforts can have so many positive benefits. For instance:**

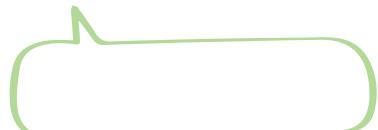


# This is the first step to becoming a powerful climate-health communicator.



## What's next?

- Practice makes perfect. We encourage you to start talking about climate change in ways that you are comfortable with, and sharing your successes with your colleagues.
- Share this guide with your colleagues and associations, and let them know what you found useful about it.
- Head online to find more information. Try searching for “climate change and health” and the country where you live. You can also check out:
  - [WHO’s broader work on health and climate change](#)
  - [WHO’s fact sheets on health and climate change](#)
  - [WHO’s advocacy and partnerships on health and climate change](#)



As a health professional, your voice matters.  
Use it to make a difference and protect  
people’s health from climate change.



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