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Report: Climate-driven weather to take toll on global health

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Heavy rains in Bangkok, Thailand, led to massive flooding in many provinces in 2011.

Photo by Gdagys, courtesy iStockphoto

Hurricane Ida ravaged areas of the U.S. last year, cutting a swath of destruction from the Gulf Coast to the Northeast. The intensity of the storm was linked to climate change.

A new February report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a group of experts convened by the United Nations, concluded that humans and nature may not be able to adapt to the dangers posed by climate change, including severe weather events such as Hurricane Ida. However, some of the dangers may be avoided if governments rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

The nearly 4,000-page report assesses the impacts of climate change by examining ecosystems, biodiversity and human communities at global and regional levels and calls for action.

“This report is a dire warning about the consequences of inaction,” Hoesung Lee, PhD, chair of the IPCC, said in a news release. “It shows that climate change is a grave and mounting threat to our well-being and a healthy planet. Our actions today will shape how people adapt and how nature responds to increasing climate risks.”

Low-income nations and vulnerable populations will be disproportionately impacted by climate change, the report said. Severe heat will likely cause mass migrations from equatorial countries, and over 140 million people, many of whom live in Asia, may have to leave coastal regions as seas rise.

While high-income countries are most responsible for climate change, low-income countries will bear the initial brunt of the effects. Report authors estimate that almost half of the world’s population is highly vulnerable to health problems caused by climate-induced weather events.

As the world warms and vectors such as mosquitoes and ticks spread and survive year-round, diseases such as Zika, dengue and Lyme disease will likely become more common. Public health officials may have to adjust interventions to combat regional expansions of vectors transmitting the diseases.

Communities and decisionmakers can work to reduce climate change impact, according to the report, which shares data and findings on climate change risk in specific regions.

So far, progress on reducing climate change is uneven around the world, with widening gaps between actions taken, results and reduction of risk.

“The cumulative scientific evidence of this report is indisputable,” Reinhard Mechler, PhD, a co-author of the report, said in a news release. “Climate change is a threat to human well-being and the health of the planet.”

The report, “Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability,” is part of the sixth assessment by the working group, with the another assessment due later this year. The first working group assessment was released in 1990.

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