

CANADA NEEDS

CLIMATE-READY HEALTHCARE

Why Planetary Health Matters?

Planetary health means that human health and the health of the planet are inseparably linked. When the environment suffers—through pollution, climate disruptions, or the loss of biodiversity—our health also deteriorates. Canada is already feeling the effects. Heatwaves, wildfires, and floods are making people sick and are putting strain on already-fragile hospitals and clinics, many of which are not designed for these emergencies.

These changes also affect mental health. People, especially youth, are reporting feelings like eco-anxiety, grief, and worry about the future. As these threats grow, healthcare must adapt to protect both people and the planet. Building a system that understands and responds to environmental risks will make us stronger and healthier.

Environmental Changes Are Affecting Our Health

Environmental stress is already making people sick, and our healthcare system isn't prepared to handle these growing challenges:

- In 2021, a heatwave in Canada caused over 600 deaths, and hospitals were overwhelmed.¹ Wildfires and floods also cause injuries, illness, and death. In 2023, healthcare facilities in Fort McMurray and Yellowknife had to evacuate due to extreme conditions.²
- Many hospitals and clinics weren't built to handle these kinds of emergencies. They often don't have the plans or resources to deal with climate-related disasters.
- Hospitals also have a significant impact on the environment. They create a lot of waste, use a lot of energy, and are responsible for about 5% of global greenhouse gas emissions.³ These environmental costs add pressure to healthcare systems already strained by the health impacts of environmental change.
- Medical schools don't always teach healthcare professionals how environmental changes affect health. Students have asked for more training in this area, including how to respond to heat, smoke, and disease. While most doctors understand these issues matter, many aren't sure how to act.
- In 2023, wildfire smoke in Ontario alone caused an estimated \$1.28 billion in health-related costs over just a few days.⁴ These kinds of costs will keep rising and will put even more burden on healthcare budgets.

The Time Is Now

Canada has a chance to make planetary health a key part of our healthcare system and show leadership to the world. In 2021, Canada reinforced this commitment by signing on to the WHO's #COP26 Health Programme, pledging to develop climate-resilient, low-carbon, and sustainable health systems.⁵ While this was an important step, further action is needed to turn that commitment into meaningful change.

By taking action today, we can protect communities, prepare healthcare systems for new challenges, and show how to respond to growing risks. All levels of government must work together to create clear policies and give health systems the tools they need to adapt.

Canada is warming at nearly three times the global rate, and health risks are increasing. By 2050, heat-related deaths in Canada could increase by 14%,⁶ and globally, climate change could cause an extra 250,000 deaths each year.⁷ The longer we wait, the harder and more expensive it will be to respond. The time to act is now.

Rapid Response

To address the urgent link between environmental pressures and health, we need a comprehensive response. This means making planetary health a central part of healthcare planning and policy:

- 1** Train healthcare professionals to recognize the direct impact of environmental change on health. This will ensure they are prepared to manage climate-related health challenges.
- 2** Adapt healthcare buildings to make sure they can still operate during extreme weather. This means fortifying hospitals and creating plans to keep them running during crises.
- 3** Invest in health research focused on environmental risks and their impact on health. Support medical schools and researchers who are leading this work.
- 4** Ensure healthcare institutions assess climate risks and create adaptation plans, while also reducing their environmental impact—including the carbon footprint of medical waste—as the healthcare sector contributes approximately 4.6% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions.⁸
- 5** Develop clear emergency response plans for health risks caused by environmental stress. Support local action and train healthcare workers to respond quickly and effectively during crises.

The AFMC Can Help

The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada (AFMC) represents all 18 schools of medicine and is the voice of academic medicine in Canada. AFMC strives to achieve excellence in medical education, health research and health equity for the benefit of all Canadians.

AFMC advocates for a stronger health workforce, better funding for health research, and the integration of planetary health in medical education and healthcare delivery.

AFMC spearheads the Academic Health Institutions' Declaration on Planetary Health. This initiative calls for all academic health institutions globally to reduce their environmental impact and prepare for climate-related health risks. AFMC has also created the Roadmap for Planetary Health, a guide for integrating sustainability and resilience into healthcare systems.

AFMC is eager to collaborate with the federal and provincial governments to strengthen Canada's healthcare system and ensure it meets future challenges.

What Can Individuals Do?

Support planetary health in Canada's healthcare system by signing the [Academic Health Institutions' Declaration on Planetary Health](#) and encouraging others to do the same. Take a look at the [AFMC Roadmap for Planetary Health](#), then share it—and this brief—with your representatives, urging them to make planetary health a priority in their policies.

Together, We Can Build a Healthier Future for All

For more information or to get involved, visit afmc.ca/advocacy or email us at advocacy@afmc.ca:

