



Air Pollution and Child Health: Prescribing Clean Air

Recently WHO has released a report on air pollution and its effect on children titled '**Air pollution and child health: prescribing clean air**'.

- The report on air pollution and child health was released on the eve of the WHO's first ever global conference (30 October 2018 - 1 November 2018) on Air Pollution and Health.
- This report summarizes the latest scientific knowledge on the links between exposure to air pollution and adverse health effects in children.
- It is intended to inform and motivate individual and collective action by health care professionals to prevent damage to children's health from exposure to air pollution.

Key Findings

- About 98 per cent of children under the age of five years in low- and middle-income countries, which include nations like India, were exposed to air pollution caused by finer particulate matters in 2016.
- Every day 1.8 billion children, which makes around 93 percent of the world's children under the age of 15 years, breathe air that is polluted enough to put their health and development at serious risk.
- Air pollution is one of the leading threats to child health, accounting for almost 1 in 10 deaths in children under five years of age.
- India faces the highest air pollution-related mortality and disease burden in the world with more than 2 million deaths occurring prematurely every year, accounting for 25% of the global deaths due to poor air quality.
- About 1,00,000 children below five years died in India in 2016, due to complications in their health that was brought about by increased levels of outdoor and indoor air pollution.
- After India, Nigeria ranked second at 98,001 number of child deaths due to air pollution in 2016, followed by Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia.
- India was among the countries where over 98 per cent of all children below five years of age live in areas that exceed the WHO air quality standards.
- Air pollution is proving to be deadly for kids, damaging their brains and infecting them with serious diseases.

Implications

- In India, nearly 65 per cent of homes still use biomass fuel for cooking and there are studies that show a positive association between household air pollution and problems among children. If the family is burning fuels like wood and kerosene for cooking, heating and lighting, they would be exposed to higher levels of pollution.
- Children exposed to high levels of air pollution may be at greater risk for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease later in life.
- When pregnant women are exposed to polluted air, they are more likely to give birth prematurely and have small, low birth-weight children.
- One reason why children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of air pollution is that they breathe more rapidly than adults and so absorb more pollutants. They also live closer to the ground, where some pollutants reach peak concentrations — at a time when their brains and bodies are still developing.

- Air pollution impacts neurological development and cognitive ability of kids, negatively affecting mental and motor development. It can also trigger asthma, and childhood cancer.
- Children who have been exposed to high levels of air pollution may be at greater risk for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease later in life. It's damaging children's lung function, even at lower levels of exposures.

Way Forward

- Promoting the use of cleaner transport, energy-efficient housing and urban planning to reduce air pollution especially fine particulate matters.
- Governments should adopt measures such as reducing the over-dependence on fossil fuels in the global energy mix and facilitating the uptake of renewable energy sources.
- Better waste management can reduce the amount of waste that is burned within communities and thereby reducing 'community air pollution'.
- Schools and playgrounds should be located away from major sources of air pollution like busy roads, factories and power plants.
- Accelerating implementation of policy measures like the switch to clean cooking and heating fuels and technologies. This can drastically improve the air quality within homes.

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