

The Link between the Environment and Our Health

Would people care more about the environment if they had a better understanding of how it affects them personally?

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Credit: Photo courtesy Thinkstock

Dear EarthTalk: Aren't environmental issues primarily about health? Detractors like to trivialize environmentalists as "tree huggers," but the bottom line is that pollution makes us sick, right? Wouldn't people care more if they had a better understanding of that?— Tim Douglas, Stowe, Vt.

No doubt many of the ways we harm our environment come back to haunt us in the form of sickness and death. The realization that the pesticide-laced foods we eat, the smokestack-befouled air we breathe and the petrochemical-based products we use negatively affect our quality of life is a big part of the reason so many people have "gone

green” in recent years.

Just following the news is enough to green anyone. *Scientific American* reported in 2009 that a joint U.S./Swedish study looking into the effects of household contaminants discovered that children who live in homes with vinyl floors—which can emit hazardous chemicals called phthalates—are twice as likely to develop signs of autism as kids in other homes. Other studies have shown that women exposed to high levels of polybrominated diphenyl ether (PBDE) flame retardants common in cushions, carpet padding and mattresses—97 percent of us have detectable levels of these chemicals in our bloodstreams—are more likely to have trouble getting pregnant and suffer from other fertility issues as a result. Cheaply produced drywall made in China can emit so much sulfur gas that it not only corrodes electrical wiring but also causes breathing problems, bloody noses and headaches for building occupants. The list goes on and on....

But perhaps trumping all of these examples is the potential disastrous health effects of global warming. Carbon dioxide emissions may not be directly responsible for health problems at or near their point of release, but in aggregate they can cause lots of distress. According to the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, climate change over the coming decades is likely to increase rates of allergies, asthma, heart disease and cancer, among other illnesses. Also, it is quite likely that, as global temperature rises, diseases that were previously found only in warmer areas of the world may show up increasingly in other, previously cooler areas, where people have not yet developed natural defenses against them. And the loss of rain forest that accompanies increases in temperature means less access to undiscovered medicines and degradation of the environment’s ability to sustain our species.

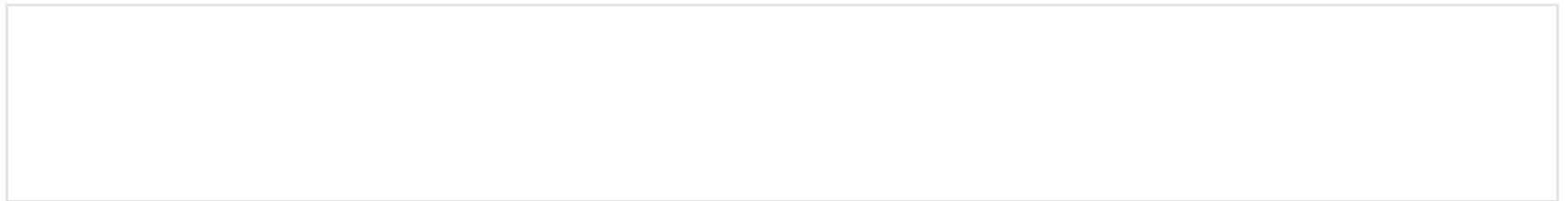
Given the link between environmental problems and human health, more of us are realizing that what may seem like exorbitant up-front costs for environmental clean-up may well pay us dividends in the end when we see our overall health care costs go down and our loved ones living longer, healthier lives.

To help bridge the understanding gap between environmental problems and human health, the nonprofit Environmental Health Sciences offers the free website, *Environmental Health News*, which features daily reports on research showing how man-made environmental problems correspond to a wide range of individual and public health problems. Even your local TV station or newspaper likely carries an occasional story about

the health effects of environmental pollution. We don't have to look very hard to find examples of environmental neglect leading to human suffering. But with newfound public awareness and the commitment of younger generations to a cleaner future, we are moving in a good direction.

CONTACTS: Harvard Medical School Center for Health and the Global Environment, <http://chge.med.harvard.edu>; *Environmental Health News*, www.environmentalhealthnews.org.

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