

# Climate change and health

Policy statement

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# Climate change and health

World Physiotherapy recognises there is a climate change emergency. Climate change is reportedly “the greatest threat to human health of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”.(1) Climate change significantly impacts on human health and wellbeing through the social and environmental determinants of health such as clean air, safe drinking water and nutritious food, as well as those arising from natural disasters. The Lancet Commission predicts that between 2030 and 2050, more than 250,000 people will die each year due to climate change, adding to the seven million deaths each year from air pollution.(1, 2) This is an alarming indication of the widespread direct and indirect health impacts of climate change.

World Physiotherapy supports international climate change statements by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN), (2-6) that call on health professionals to take immediate actions on climate change while respecting, promoting, and considering, obligations for human rights and the right to health for all.

The UN's sustainable development goal (SDG) 13 specifically calls for action to combat climate change and its impacts, and recognises that it is intrinsically linked to all other SDGs, including health.(5) Due to the inter-sectoral nature of climate change within society, and the actions required to mitigate it, there is a need to make policy advances across many sectors including the environment, transport, education, and health and social care.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) includes environmental factors in recognition of the important role of environment in people's functioning. These factors range from physical factors (such as climate, terrain or building design) to social factors (such as attitudes, institutions, and laws). Interaction with environmental factors is an essential aspect of the scientific understanding of 'functioning and disability'. (7)

Physiotherapists need to be aware of these interconnections between climate change, sustainable development, and global health. It is important that we collectively take action to reduce our environmental footprint(8) and protect health and wellbeing.

Health care accounts for 4.6% of global emissions,(1) and the health sector needs to not only adapt to the health impacts of climate change and protect human health, but also to mitigate the environmental impacts from our work. (9) Physiotherapists have a role to play in addressing the contributing factors within healthcare facilities, working practices, and advocating for practices that support sustainability and health promotion. Raising awareness and capability building on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning recognition, are all steps that can lead to positive change.

The UN and WHO have called on those in high income countries/territories to support multilateral climate change processes, and to strengthen their support for financial assistance, technology development and implementation, along with capacity and leadership building, for at risk and vulnerable countries/territories, as well as indigenous peoples, based on social justice and equity. (3, 4, 10)

## **World Physiotherapy recognises:**

- the relationship between climate change, health, and society
- the profession's responsibility to advance action on climate change in policy and physiotherapy practice(11)
- the role physiotherapists can play in contributing actions that minimise and mitigate climate change and its impact on health, supporting individuals to adapt to maximise functional ability

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- that building climate change resilience and improving outcomes that support the UNs sustainable development goals (SDGs) must include efforts to improve and sustain positive social and environmental determinants of health(12)
  - that although climate change is a global issue there will be a disproportionate burden experienced by those who have the least capacity to mitigate its impacts due to resource inequities

**World Physiotherapy encourages and supports its member organisations to:**

- advocate for the monitoring and evaluation of the environmental costs of physiotherapy practices to ensure that physiotherapy services do not threaten global health and service delivery costs, and to support the implementation of sustainable approaches to reducing the environmental footprint of healthcare
- promote the role of physiotherapists in health promotion approaches to empower and engage people and communities in lifestyle changes that reduce the impact of climate change, such as physical activity and the use of public transportation modes, where feasible (13)
- advocate for public policies and practices that enable individuals, families, and communities to make healthy life choices that are also environmentally friendly to mitigate climate change
- collaborate with others to advocate and educate the health professional community, service users, the public and governments of the benefits to health of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental degradation activities, and the important role of physiotherapists in contributing to mitigating the impact of climate change
- advocate that physiotherapists play an important role in advising individuals and targeted populations, such as the elderly, children, people with long-term conditions or those with functional limitations and impairments, on appropriate and effective physical activity programmes to adapt to the health problems caused by climate change
- advocate for physiotherapists involvement in systems-wide discussions to develop policies and plans that enable reduction in the causes of climate change and their impact on health
- advocate for adequate resources to contribute to climate change mitigation, adaptation, and a climate resilient health system, ensuring that all countries/territories are supported to strengthen their health systems and reduce the environmental impact of health services (14)
- advocate for physiotherapists involvement in relevant research that contributes to the understanding of effective interventions and adaptive measures when individual, family or community health is affected by climate change, as well as exploring the environmental impacts of physiotherapy practice
- urge governments to invest in climate change research, monitoring and surveillance to improve understanding of the health benefits of mitigation for climate change and adaptive measures at the community and national levels
- promote that physiotherapist entry level education programmes should enable graduates to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies necessary to play a key role in provision of physiotherapy practices that support sustainability taking account of climate change impacts on health

**Glossary** (<https://world.physio/resources/glossary>)

**Environmental costs**

**Global health**

**Health**

**Impairment**

**Physical activity**

Approval, review and related policy information	
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<b>Related World Physiotherapy policies:</b>	World Physiotherapy policy statements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Ethical principles and responsibilities of physiotherapists and member organisations</a></li> </ul>

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