



HEALTH (ENVIRONMENTAL)

Caring for environmental health involves the protection of human health relevant to physical, chemical, biological and social factors within the environment (WHO), whilst supporting and maintaining environments that nurture healthy communities. Environmental health issues continue to become increasingly related to unsustainable consumption of natural resources and the associated wastes involved. It can also be jeopardised by other hazards, for example poverty and urban development with few or no health and environmental safeguards. For example, inadequate or unsafe water supplies and air pollution kill 5-6 million people annually in developing countries, while poor environmental quality causes over 25% of preventable illnesses worldwide (Europa).

Environmental health hazards include

- water pollution caused from populated areas, industry and agriculture
- urban air pollution from transport and industry
- hazardous waste accumulation eg. Chemicals kept around the home
- chemical and radiation hazards, (mostly resulting from new technologies)
- deforestation and land degradation (causing degraded lands and thus humans)
- global climate change (affects all organisms on earth)

Some products, for example oil, create potential environmental health hazards throughout their lifecycle. While oil and the energy it supplies provides benefits to society, every stage of its life cycle, from exploration to end-use can cause harm to both humans and the environment, creating environmental health issues. Drilling and extraction cause hazards like fires, occupational injury and disease, and can lead to serious and long-term harm to plant and animal communities. Oil spills along coastlines adversely impact on marine life and fisheries, threatening the livelihoods of those who rely on them. Workers and wildlife are exposed to toxic and carcinogenic petroleum and the chemicals used in its refining process. Society is exposed to petrol at the petrol station, while the combustion in vehicles results in air pollution and acid rain. Last but not least, gas emissions from burning oil is contributing to the world's climate system, significantly affecting health, agricultural productivity and ecosystems (Harvard University).

References:

Europa, online at <http://europa.eu.int>

Harvard University, online at

<http://www.med.harvard.edu/chge/oilpress.html>

World Health Organisation, online at <http://www.who.int/>

WHAT CAN I DO?

- Everyone's actions can result in environmental changes that contribute to the many illnesses associated with the degradation of the natural systems our health relies on. With examples including respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, psychological and neurological disorders, and the increased incidence of cancer, it is in our best interests to:
 - Stay up to date regarding environmental health issues that may pose a threat, as well as on information for products that use dangerous chemicals;
 - Use safer, less toxic, natural alternatives to household chemicals used for cleaning and in the garden. For example, a general purpose cleaner, made cheaply and without the use of chemicals is simply warm water mixed with pure soap or white vinegar.
 - All citizens can help change industry practice and government policies that cause environmental health hazards through not purchasing harmful products, writing or emailing the appropriate organisations to let them know how you feel, and informing those around you. There are many websites and mailing lists to help you out in this regard.

MORE INFORMATION

- <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/environment/> - environmental health resources for Australians.
<http://www.preventharm.org> - The Environmental Health Strategy Center works to protect human health by reducing toxic chemical, promoting safer alternatives, and building partnerships that focus on the environment as a public health priority
- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/environmentalhealth.html> - The U.S. National Library of Medicine and National Institute of Health provide a wide array of information relating to health and environmental hazards
- <http://ipen.ecn.cz/> - International POPs (Persisten Organic Pollutants) Elimination Network
- <http://www.resource.nsw.gov.au/easyguides.htm#cleaning> - the NSW Department of Environment and Conservation's easy guide to natural cleaning, provides information on natural alternatives to household chemicals.
<http://www.tec.org.au/member/tec/projects/tcye/> provides information on toxic chemicals and some solutions and alternatives, at schools, in the workplace and at home.