

Air pollution worse for global lifespan than cigarettes or alcohol

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Updated June 15, 2022 at 6:04 p.m. EDT | Published June 15, 2022 at 4:51 p.m. EDT

Breathing is more dangerous than smoking cigarettes or drinking alcohol.

That's according to the latest report from the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago, which says that air pollution now takes more than two years off the global average life expectancy — more than cigarettes, alcohol, or conflict and terrorism.

The annual [report](#), known as the Air Quality Life Index, or AQLI, was released Tuesday. It found that particulate air pollution — a mixture of contaminants such as smoke, fumes, dust and pollen — has remained high, even as the coronavirus pandemic slowed the global economy and [brought blue skies](#) to some of the world's most polluted areas.

At the same time, evidence of the health risks associated with pollution has grown, the index says, adding that world leaders aren't treating the problem with the urgency it deserves.

“It would be a global emergency if Martians came to Earth and sprayed a substance that caused the average person on the planet to lose more than 2 years of life expectancy,” Michael Greenstone, director of Chicago's Energy Policy Institute, said in a [news release](#).

“This is similar to the situation that prevails in many parts of the world,” he said. “Except we are spraying the substance, not some invaders from outer space.”

Air pollution can lead to strokes, heart disease, lung cancer and other respiratory diseases, according to the World Health Organization. It is on track to reduce the global average life expectancy by 2.2 years, the report says.

In comparison, smoking cigarettes cuts life expectancy by about 1.9 years, while drinking alcohol reduces it by eight months. Unsafe water and sanitation lead to a seven-month reduction in life expectancy, according to AQLI, with conflict and terrorism shaving off just nine days.

Unlike cigarettes or alcohol, the report's researchers say, air pollution is “nearly impossible to avoid.”

Because of the growing health risks, last year the WHO for the first time since 2005 updated its guidance on the acceptable level of air pollution people should breathe, from a recommended ceiling of 10 µg/m³ to 5 µg/m³. Under the revised benchmark, roughly 97 percent of the world's population lives in places where air pollution exceeds the recommended level, according to the AQLI analysis.

South Asia is the world's most polluted region, according to the report — and the place where breathing the air is deadliest. The rising pollution levels come as the region develops and populations grow, leading to greater fossil fuel use.

Bangladesh is the most polluted country, while roughly 44 percent of the increased pollution in the world since 2013 has come from India.

If current levels persist, residents of South Asia are projected to lose about five years of life on average. New Delhi, India's capital, is the “most polluted megacity in the world,” the report found, with average annual pollution levels reaching more than 21 times the WHO guideline.

More than 97 percent of Central and West Africa is considered to have unsafe levels of pollution under WHO standards. That's compared with 92.8 percent of the United States and 95.5 percent of Europe having air quality that is worse than recommended.

The United States and Europe have “largely been successfully enforcing strong pollution rules,” the report says, but renewed government focus on the issue is needed.

Permanently reducing air pollution to meet the WHO guideline would add 2.2 years to the global average life expectancy, raising it from about 72 to 74.2 years. The world's population would gain 17 billion years of life in total, the report says.

The researchers point to China as an example of a country that has successfully cleaned up its air.

After China recorded some of its highest pollution levels in 2013, its government declared a “war against pollution.” It prohibited new coal-fired power plants in certain regions, required existing plants to reduce emissions and mandated that large cities restrict the number of cars on the road.

The measures helped reduce particulate pollution in China by nearly 40 percent — although it continues to exceed the WHO's recommended level — and added about two years to the average life expectancy there.

Greenstone told The Washington Post that he expects “a modest increase” in pollution in the coming years as more countries double down on coal and other fossil fuels in response to the global energy crisis.

“Among the fossil fuels, coal is the champion in terms of producing particulate air pollution that causes people to lead shorter and sicker lives today, and increasing the rate of climate change,” he said.

Air pollution is “deeply intertwined” with climate change, the report says, so tackling it can kill two birds with one stone.

“Policy can simultaneously reduce dependence on fossil fuels that will allow people to live longer and healthier lives and reduce the costs of climate change,” the researchers wrote.

But that requires greater funding and political will, they said. Less than \$45 million is spent by all philanthropic organizations on air pollution each year globally, which represents 0.1 percent of total yearly grantmaking, Christa Hasenkopf, AQLI's director, wrote in the report's introduction.

“A relatively small increase in support can have an outsized impact, filling basic air quality management gaps such as access to continuous, reliable air quality monitoring data,” she wrote.