Adapt now to prevent poor health from climate change

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Drought-reduced crop yields could threaten food supply in Australia. Credit: David Kelleher/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

Australians will have to adapt to reduce the risk of health impacts from climate change, according to a report released today by the Australian Academy of Science.

Bruce Armstrong, Professor of Public Health at the University of Sydney and co-chair of the report, said even if we are successful in mitigating the worst effects of climate change, "there will still be major adaptations required".

"We have already had about 1C of global warming. On present trajectories it is highly unlikely that we will avoid 2C of global warming. We know that these are going to have major effects. We have to start thinking about it now," he said.

Health issues identified in the report include extreme weather events such as fires, floods, and heatwaves; increased risk of infectious diseases; problems with food supply; loss of livelihoods including farming, fishing and tourism; and conflict provoked by displacement and migration.

The most vulnerable are sick, older, younger, poorer and isolated people, including those cut off from infrastructure in remote and rural regions, but also people who experience social or linguistic distance from others. However the report also said there needs to be more research on who specifically could be worst off.

The report makes eight key recommendations, including better communication of specific threats such as bushfires, and making big data available to researchers. It calls for "no regrets" policies that can benefit communities in ways other than reducing vulnerability to climate change.

Ailie Gallant, ARC DECRA Fellow at Monash University and a rapporteur on the report, said overall the impacts on food supply thanks to falling rainfall would be negative. The struggle of farmers to adapt to variability – such as the current droughts affecting south west Queensland – bodes ill for adaptation to longer term changes.

She highlighted education campaigns or economic strategies such as taxes or subsidies to get people eating more healthy and sustainable food, and technology solutions such as pest management and new varieties of crops.

She said farmers growing new varieties of wine grapes suited to warmer climates was a good example of adaptation.

However she warned the science of adaptation is still in its infancy, and solutions needed to be prepared and tested now. "Research and development takes multiple years to decades," she said.

Hilary Bambrick, an Associate Professor at the University of Western Sydney's Centre for Health Research and an author of the report, said it was important to prepare both for extreme events with obvious health consequences, such as heatwaves, and for longer-term impacts such as the geographical expansion of diseases like dengue.

She pointed out that the poor are likely to be hit hardest by climate-related health impacts.

"The specific vulnerabilities depend somewhat on what the threat is, but generally those who are sick, poor, or disadvantaged in some other way are most at risk. Fresh food, for example, becomes less affordable as productivity declines, or as drought or some other extreme event occurs and wipes out a crop," she said.

She said that while the health system is "reasonably well-equipped" to meet the challenge, community spirit will also be important. "Communities that are socially connected and physically active, with housing and infrastructure that is built to withstand extremes, and with access to community safe havens (such as an air-conditioned shopping mall) will withstand climate change better than one where people are

inactive, socially isolated, living in substandard houses."

Australian National University health researcher Liz Hanna said the list of those vulnerable to the health effects of heat includes not just older or unwell people, but anyone who works outdoors or plays outdoor sport, and even commuters.

"The risk increases with increasing physical intensity. Fatigue is self-protective, however people are often motivated, for a myriad of reasons, to ignore the warning signs. Finishing a task, fearing ridicule, trying to get home, or not disappointing others can all be fatal during heat extremes. This 'pressing on' in the heat leaves people who mistakenly thought they would cope with heat, at risk of heat stroke," she said.

"What we will increasingly find is that more days every year will be so hot that it becomes dangerous for most of the population to go about their daily activities."

Hanna said it will be vital to adapt to rising heat, by being alert to extreme weather warnings, planning ahead and rearranging activities when necessary, and avoiding over-exertion.

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