WHO recommends much stricter air pollution limits

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The World Health Organization (WHO) recommended much stricter limits for air pollutants on Wednesday.

The WHO's new Global Air Quality Guidelines, which contain complex measurements for a range of pollutants over certain time frames, are more stringent than current European Union rules for example.

The United Nations body said in a statement that studies have shown poor air quality is much more harmful to people than had long been assumed.

"Air pollution is a threat to health in all countries, but it hits people in low- and middle-income countries the hardest," said WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

"WHO's new Air Quality Guidelines are an evidence-based and practical tool for improving the quality of the air on which all life depends. I urge all countries and all those fighting to protect our environment to put them to use to reduce suffering and save lives."

Dust particles and nitrogen dioxide (NO_2) are among the most concerning pollutants.

Air pollution has also played a role in the coronavirus pandemic, the WHO added. People with a respiratory illness due to poor air run a greater risk than a healthy person of becoming severely ill if infected with coronavirus.

Each year, the WHO estimates 7 million people worldwide die prematurely as a result of air pollution. In children, the growth of the lungs can be disturbed and asthma symptoms can increase.

In adults, air pollution can help cause heart disease and strokes.

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