

Heat projected to kill nearly five times more people by 2050

November 15 2023, by Daniel Lawler



Scientists have warned that the number of heat-related deaths will soar in the coming decades if the world does not decrease its carbon emissions.

Nearly five times more people will likely die due to extreme heat in the coming decades, an international team of experts said Wednesday,

warning that without action on climate change the "health of humanity is at grave risk".

Lethal heat was just one of the many ways the world's still-increasing use of fossil fuels threatens human health, according to The Lancet Countdown, a major annual assessment carried out by leading researchers and institutions.

More common droughts will put millions at risk of starving, mosquitoes spreading farther than ever before will take infectious diseases with them, and health systems will struggle to cope with the burden, the researchers warned.

The dire assessment comes during what is expected to be the hottest year in human history—just last week, Europe's climate monitor declared that last month was the warmest October on record.

It also comes ahead of the COP28 climate talks in Dubai later this month, which will for the first time host a "health day" on December 3 as experts try to shine a light on global warming's impact on health.

Despite growing calls for global action, energy-related carbon emissions hit new highs last year, The Lancet Countdown report said, singling out still-massive government subsidies and private bank investments into planet-heating fossil fuels.

'Crisis on top of a crisis'

Last year people worldwide were exposed to an average of 86 days of life-threatening temperatures, according to The Lancet Countdown study. Around 60 percent of those days were made more than twice as likely due to climate change, it said.

The number of people over 65 who died from heat rose by 85 percent from 1991-2000 to 2013-2022, it added.

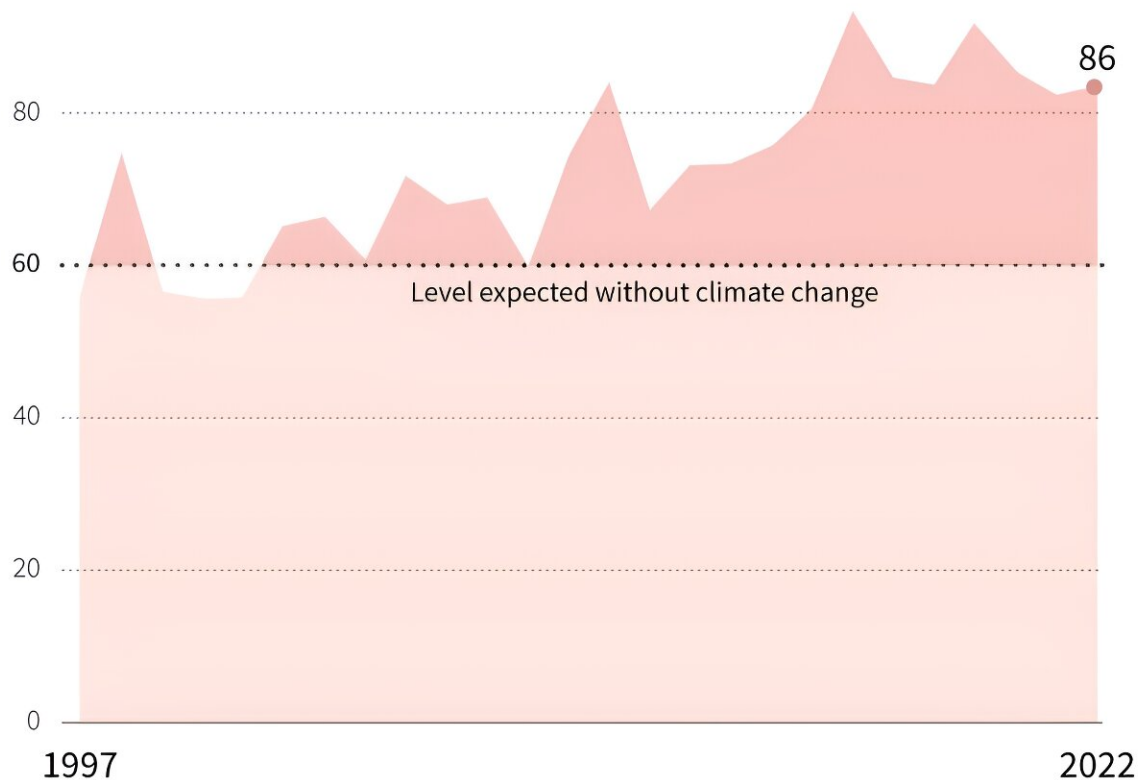
"However these impacts that we are seeing today could be just an early symptom of a very dangerous future," Lancet Countdown's executive director Marina Romanello said.

Under a scenario in which the world warms by two degrees Celsius by the end of the century—it is currently on track for 2.7C—annual heat-related deaths were projected to increase 370 percent by 2050. That marks a 4.7-fold increase.

Around 520 million more people will experience moderate or severe food insecurity by mid-century, according to the projections.

Climate change increasing dangerous heat

Days of exposure to potentially fatal temperatures* for people at risk (elderly and very young), by year, global average



*when temperatures exceed a conservative threshold over which heat-related deaths are likely to increase

Source: Lancet report on health and climate change



Graphic showing the increase in the number of days when temperatures are dangerous for human health from 1997 to 2022, according to the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change 2023.

And mosquito-borne infectious diseases will continue to spread into new areas. The transmission of dengue would increase by 36 percent under a 2C warming scenario, according to the study.

Meanwhile, more than a quarter of cities surveyed by the researchers said they were worried that climate change would overwhelm their capacity to cope.

"We're facing a crisis on top of a crisis," said Lancet Countdown's Georgiana Gordon-Strachan, whose homeland Jamaica is currently in the middle of a dengue outbreak.

"People living in poorer countries, who are often least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, are bearing the brunt of the health impacts," she said.

'Moving in the wrong direction'

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told an online conference launching The Lancet Countdown report that limiting warming to the Paris agreement target of 1.5C is a "public health imperative".

"The world is moving in the wrong direction, unable to curb its addiction to fossil fuels and leaving vulnerable communities behind in the much-needed energy transition," Tedros said.

On Tuesday, the UN warned that countries' current pledges will cut global carbon emissions by just two percent by 2030 from 2019 levels—far short of the 43 percent drop needed to limit warming to 1.5C.

Romanello cautioned that if more progress is not made on emissions, then "the growing emphasis on health within climate change negotiations risks being just empty words".

However there are "glimmers of hope", she added.

The number of global deaths linked to air pollution from fossil fuels has fallen 16 percent since 2005, mostly thanks to efforts to reduce the impact of coal burning, the report said.

Global investment in green energy rose by 15 percent to \$1.6 trillion last year, compared to \$1 trillion for fossil fuels.

And if people changed to healthier, lower-carbon diets it would prevent up to 12 million deaths a year, at the same reducing emissions from dairy and red meat production by 57 percent, the report said.

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