

New report shows perils of air pollution persist nationwide

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The American Lung Association's latest State of the Air report concludes that even though Americans have changed their ways

significantly over the last 50-plus years, the struggle to provide cleaner air is far from being won.

In fact, the challenge is greater than ever. We have made most of the easy fixes, the experts tell us. And even as we continue those efforts, it's time to work harder on the growing threat [climate change](#) poses to the air we breathe.

The ALA report says that 130 million Americans—more than one third of the population—routinely breathe unhealthy air. The consequences of breathing dirty air can be dire, causing the [premature death](#) of possibly hundreds of thousands of Americans every year.

Starting with the Clean Air Act of 1970, Americans have done a reasonably good job of reducing the [fine particles](#) in the air that can penetrate the lungs and get into the bloodstream, causing a range of health problems.

We've cut those particles about 40% across the nation by controlling the pollution emitted from vehicles and factories, and from power plants that burn fossil fuels. The most marked improvements have been in big industrial cities, mostly in East Coast states. Such measures must continue, including switching to cleaner fuels whenever possible.

But [hotter temperatures](#) and erratic weather caused by climate change are posing serious concerns, including more [ozone pollution](#). The ozone layer in the upper atmosphere is a valuable shield from the sun's ultraviolet radiation. Close to the ground, though, it attacks the lungs if breathed in.

Climate change also brings more hot, dry air, contributing to the outbreak and spread of wildfires. Smoke from wildfires causes significant air pollution, especially in western states.

Make no mistake: All Americans are at risk, and most of us are guilty of contributing unnecessarily to climate change.

Comparatively speaking, the Hampton Roads area gets fairly high marks for air quality. The Virginia Beach-Norfolk area is tied for No. 1 cleanest metropolitan area in the nation for 24-hour particle pollution.

While overall the averages in our area may look pretty good, the reality is that some of our neighbors have dealt for years with serious air pollution that affects their quality of life and poses health problems. In Lamberts Point in Norfolk and the Southeast Community in Newport, coal dust spreads from open-top trains and mountains of coal waiting to be shipped.

That dust settles on anything outside, and it seeps into buildings. Residents of those neighborhoods are more likely than others to suffer asthma and other respiratory diseases, not to mention cancers that are believed to be related to particle pollution. Most of the people who live in those areas have low incomes, and a disproportionate number are minorities.

More than a dozen [advocacy groups](#), including New Virginia Majority and the Sierra Club, petitioned the federal Environmental Protection Agency last year for more regulations on coal transportation and storage, citing the Newport News and Norfolk communities as prime examples of problems. The petition says that the coal ash damages human health and also aquatic life, damaging seagrasses, fish and shellfish.

What can you do to combat air pollution? The ALA offers some suggestions, including advocating with [government officials](#) on all levels to take measures to clean up the air and combat climate change.

Keep an eye on air-pollution forecasts and stay inside as much as

possible when conditions are unhealthy.

Individuals also can do their part to reduce contributions to air pollution: walk, bike or use public transportation when possible. Conserve electricity. Don't burn leaves or trash. Switch to cleaner vehicles and appliances, possibly with the help of tax credits from the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act.

Across the nation, Americans, with the help of strategic regulations, have done a pretty good job with the easiest ways of reducing air pollution. We can't let up on those efforts, even as we must tackle the tougher challenge of reducing the carbon emissions that feed climate change.

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