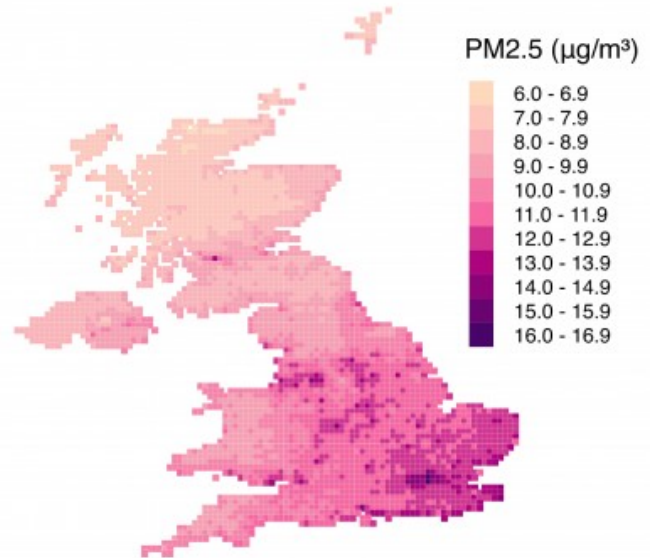


# Over 90% of world breathing bad air: WHO

September 27 2016



Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific region—including China, Malaysia and Vietnam—are the hardest hit by air pollution, according to the World Health Organization

Nine out of 10 people globally are breathing poor quality air, the World Health Organization [said](#) Tuesday, calling for dramatic action against pollution that is blamed for more than six million deaths a year.

New data in a report from the UN's global health body "is enough to make all of us extremely concerned," Maria Neira, the head of the WHO's department of public health and environment, told reporters.

The problem is most acute in cities, but air in rural areas is worse than many think, WHO experts said.

Poorer countries have much dirtier air than the developed world, according to the report, but pollution "affects practically all countries in the world and all parts of society", Neira said in a statement.

"It is a [public health emergency](#)," she said.

90% of the UK's population lives in areas where outdoor pollution is higher than the WHO recommended limit of 10 micrograms per cubic metre. Credit: University of Bath

"Fast action to tackle air pollution can't come soon enough," she added, urging governments to cut the number of vehicles on the road, improve waste management and promote clean cooking fuel.

Tuesday's report was based on data collected from more than 3,000 sites across the globe.

It found that "92 percent of the world's population lives in places where air quality levels exceed WHO limits".

The data focuses on dangerous particulate matter with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometres, or PM2.5.

## Tracking bad air

Poor quality air blamed for more than 6 million deaths a year

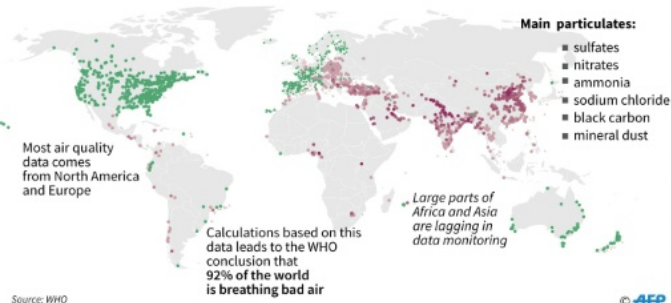
Survey of 3,000 outdoor air quality databases

2008 - 2015

Annual average  
Micrograms of PM2.5 per cubic metre of air

<10 10 - 19 20 - 39 40 - 59 60 - 99 >99

WHO's recommended safe level for PM2.5 is 10 micrograms per cubic metre of air, as an annual average



Source: WHO

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### Tracking bad air

PM2.5 includes toxins like sulfate and black carbon, which can penetrate deep into the lungs or cardiovascular system.

Air with more than 10 microgrammes per cubic metre of PM2.5 on an annual average basis is considered substandard.

In some regions satellite data has been complemented by ground-level PM2.5 measurements, but in much of the developing world ground readings remain unavailable, forcing the WHO to rely on cruder estimates.

Despite these data gaps, Neira said the UN agency now had more information than ever about pollutants in the planet's air.

Using both satellite and ground measurements "is a big step forward towards even more confident estimates of the huge global burden", of dirty air, she added.

WHO data shows that outdoor pollution is responsible for more than three million fatalities annually

### Six million deaths a year

The WHO has estimated that more than six million deaths per year are linked to exposure to outdoor and indoor air pollution.

Data is more solid for outdoor pollution, which is blamed for more than three million fatalities annually.

But indoor pollution can be equally as harmful, especially in poorer developing world homes where cooking often involves burning charcoal.

Nearly 90-percent of air pollution-related deaths occur in low and middle-income countries, the WHO said.

Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific region—including China, Malaysia and Vietnam—are the hardest hit, the data showed.



Nine out of 10 people globally are breathing poor quality air, the World Health Organization says

Carlos Dora, coordinator at the WHO's [public health](#) and environment department, said that some of the strategies adopted to safeguard against polluted air have limited effectiveness.

For example, daily air quality warnings—like those sometimes issued in Beijing—likely do little to help the average person, since the real threat is exposure to sub-par air over extended periods.

Staying indoors on a day when the air is particularly bad accomplishes little, Dora said.

Additionally, the WHO has seen no conclusive evidence that face masks do much to filter [dirty air](#), Dora added.

Using a different data set, the WHO reported in May that 80 percent of the world's city dwellers breathe poor quality air, a figure that rose to 98 percent in [poorer countries](#).

**More information:**

[www.who.int/phe/publications/a ... lobal-assessment/en/](http://www.who.int/phe/publications/global-assessment/en/)

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APA citation: Over 90% of world breathing bad air: WHO (2016, September 27) retrieved 9 December 2022 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-09-world-bad-air.html>

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