

Smog chokes coal-addicted Poland

5 February 2017, by Mary Sibierski



A study published last year by the EEA blamed air pollution, caused in large part by the burning of coal, for an estimated 50,000 premature deaths per year in Poland

The soupy grey smog shrouding Polish cities this winter is one of the most visible symptoms of the EU member's addiction to coal, a deadly habit forcing many to stay indoors or don masks before venturing out.

Professor Anna Doboszynska, a respected specialist with more than two decades of experience treating lung disease, minces no words about the health risks it poses.

"During periods of [smog](#), more people with respiratory and circulatory illnesses actually die," she told AFP after examining an asthma patient wheezing heavily amid a spike in pollution in Warsaw.

"Children, pregnant women and the elderly are most at risk from smog, which damages the respiratory tract much in the same way smoking does.

"A child playing outside in the smog is smoking cigarettes, it's the same thing," she told AFP.

One Warsaw hospital reported a 50 percent spike in patients over several days of intense smog during a windless cold snap in January.

As anti-smog masks sold out across Poland this week, Warsaw issued them to police officers on duty across the capital.

A study published last year by the European Environmental Agency (EEA) blamed air pollution—caused in large part by the burning of coal—for an estimated 50,000 premature deaths per year in the country of 38 million people.

Seventy percent of Polish households burn low-quality coal or rubbish in old stoves for heat and antiquated coal-fired power plants generate nearly all of Poland's electricity, giving it some of the dirtiest air in the 28-member EU.

The EEA also blames so-called "low-stack" emissions from old household stoves for countless cases of respiratory illness.



Poland's capital Warsaw is shrouded in a thick layer of smog as coal and waste-fired home furnaces drive up air pollution to the highest levels recorded in years

The AirVisuals website regularly lists Warsaw,

Katowice or Krakow among the world's top ten most polluted cities alongside Beijing or New Delhi.

'Government inaction'

Karolina, a Warsaw mother of three who did not wish to reveal her surname, says checking mobile phone apps for smog levels and wearing masks have become part of her family's daily routine.

"My son's had pneumonia twice within the last 10 months and my daughter was sick all October and November. But, of course, nobody's blaming smog, even though we live in an area of Warsaw where there's chronic air pollution," she told AFP.

"What scares me the most is the total lack of information and government inaction.

"There are days on end when the smog is so bad that school and kindergarten should be closed, but nothing is being done."

Authorities in Poland only alert the public when air pollution exceeds the EU-wide norm by a whopping 600 percent, according to Piotr Siergiej, an activist with anti-smog NGO "Alarm Smogowy".

The EU limit for exposure to fine air pollutants known as PM 10 particles is 50 microgrammes per cubic meter per day.

"In Paris, authorities announce smog alerts and take action when pollution exceeds 80 microgrammes per cubic meter per day," Siergiej told AFP.

"In Poland, the alert level is 300 microgrammes," he added, slamming the measure as a "health hazard".

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