



[Comments](#) 0 | [Recommend](#) 0

Climate change's health impact a hot topic for Dallas County agency

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, August 3, 2008

By **JEFFREY WEISS** / The Dallas Morning News
jweiss@dallasnews.com

The effects of climate change will make some people sick and place new burdens on many local health departments, according to two new national reports. But there's good news for Dallas.

The North Texas climate is already so, um, challenging that most of the potential horrors are already on the to-do list for local health officials.

Deadly heat waves? Check. Killer thunderstorms and tornadoes? Check. Sickening smog? Check. Mosquitoes capable of carrying malaria, yellow fever, dengue fever and West Nile virus? Check and double-check.

"We're aware of and involved with environmental effects on health today," said Dr. John Carlo, medical director for the Dallas County Department of Health and Human Services. "We already see the weather has an impact now."

The vast majority of weather scientists say the world is already experiencing climate change and an increase in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. While there is still lively scientific debate about the degree of change and the extent to which people might affect it, even the previously skeptical Bush administration now says that the world is getting warmer – and that the change is likely to affect people's lives.

One of the new reports was released last month by the U.S. Climate Change Science Program, an agency that monitors federal research on climate and global change. Here's the bottom line from the report:

"While there may be fewer cases of illness and death associated with climate change in the United States than in the developing world, we nevertheless anticipate increased costs to human health and well-being."

What kinds of costs are likely, according to the report? More people will die from heat-related issues. Ozone will make it harder to breathe. Storms will wreck more property and injure more people. Diseases will spread to places where they hadn't been.



LARA SOLT/DMN
Jeremy Fry, 18, holds up a sheet to block out the sun while enjoying an air conditioner installed by Dallas County's Health and Human Services Department. The agency offers programs to assist residents with insulation and utilities.

The section of the country that includes Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana faces a variety of possible effects that include degraded air quality, heat waves, wildfires and extreme rainfall with flooding, the report said.

However, the Environmental Protection Agency will not be using the report to propose new regulations on greenhouse gases. EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson said last month that Congress would need to pass new laws better designed to handle that problem, even though the U.S. Supreme Court last year ruled that the EPA has the authority to regulate carbon dioxide and other emissions tied to climate change.

Add to the federal report a research study published last week, detailing a national survey of local health departments. The survey, performed by a research team led by Dr. Edward Maibach of George Mason University in Virginia, asked 133 randomly selected health department directors for their views about climate change and local readiness.

About 60 percent of those surveyed said they thought their jurisdiction would be dealing with one or more serious public health problems resulting from climate change in the next 20 years. But only two in 10 said the issue was one of that department's top 10 current priorities. And less than a third of the health department directors said that other local officials, business leaders and health care delivery leaders knew about the potential health effects of climate change.

And the American Public Health Association, the oldest and largest national association of public health professionals, focused on the issue this spring, setting the theme of its annual National Public Health Week as "Climate Change: Our Health in the Balance."

So what is Dallas doing? The county health department already has programs to help people with insulation and utilities for their homes, "vector control" to track ways that diseases are spread, and sanitation inspections that are intended to prevent diseases from getting a foothold, Dr. Carlo said.

In particular, the county has a broad network of bug traps designed to spot new insects and new bug-carried diseases coming into the area.

The Dallas County department is the largest in the region, and it works regularly with neighboring counties, Dr. Carlo said. Climate change itself has not been discussed in multicounty meetings, he said. But the health departments do cooperate in tracking the northward spread of West Nile virus, pegged by some scientists to warming, he said.

Local jurisdictions in some other parts of the country do not need to routinely address all of these weather-related issues, said Dr. Paul Epstein, associate director of Harvard University's Center for Health and Global Environment.

"It may be that Dallas is much better prepared than many of the health departments around the country," he said.

But that's not to say that Mother Nature might not toss a curveball or two not covered by Dallas' plans, he said.

For instance, asthma and allergies will get worse. Higher carbon dioxide levels are already prodding ragweed into producing more pollen, Dr. Epstein said. Add to that more fungus spores from mushrooms that are happier in warmer, high-CO2 environments. And the effects of higher ozone levels on sensitive

lungs. And an extended growing season that will push the start of the spring pollen release earlier and the end of the fall release later.

Other research has also predicted not-so-obvious effects from higher temperatures.

Last month, researchers at the University of Texas at Dallas and UT Southwestern Medical School predicted that some cities could see an increase in the number of people developing kidney stones – which would add to the burden on doctors and medical equipment needed to treat the condition.

Dr. Carlo acknowledged that there could be climate-related health problems over the horizon that his department isn't ready for.

"Could it get worse? Yes it could. Are we prepared for all of that?" he asked. "I don't know if anybody could be."