

Climate change is health problem, expert says

By KEVIN ABOUREZK / Lincoln Journal Star

Scientists have blamed global warming and climate change for shrunken glaciers, rising sea levels and longer, more intense heat waves.

But how is the Earth's changing environment harming human health and what can be done to mitigate those effects?

An environmental researcher and medical doctor offered her thoughts Wednesday on the effect of climate change on individual and community health.

"It's a health problem, and we need a response," Wendy Ring said during a speech at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "There's really very little time left."

Ring earned her medical degree and a Master's Degree in Public Health from Yale and Columbia. She was the medical director of a California community health center for more than 20 years and has been recognized by Congress, the California Legislature and the American Medical Association for her work in improving access to care for the underserved.

Now, she's touring the nation as part of a national engagement effort on climate change and health organized by Physicians for Social Responsibility and Climate911.

She cited heat waves over the past two decades in Europe, Russia and Chicago as causing tens of thousands of deaths, and they're increasing in length, frequency and severity, she said.

For every 10-degree rise in above-average summer temperature, a 5 percent increase in deaths occurs from increased incidents of cardiovascular disease and diabetes, Ring said. She said a study showed nearly 10,000 people die each year because of increased temperatures caused by climate change.

Air pollution caused by emissions from industrial facilities and motor vehicles is resulting in higher levels of ground-level ozone that is causing increasing rates of asthma, especially in younger children who play sports, Ring said.

"For every increase in ozone, even when under the EPA standard, we see an increase in deaths," she said.

Other effects from climate change, according to Ring, include these:

- * Increased flooding, which leads to more mold-related asthma cases.
- * Air pollution caused by wildfires that can hurt heart and lung functions.

* Increase in mosquito-borne diseases, such as West Nile Virus, as a result of increased rainfall.

* Increase in water temperatures that has caused increase in marine bacteria that infect humans who eat sickened seafood.

* Higher water temperatures also led to an increase in blue green algae that can harm the human liver, causing hepatitis and liver cancer.

Ring encourages people to support the efforts of Climate911 to gain increases in federal subsidies for public transportation, more efficient homes and cars, farmers who grow vegetables and clean energy.

“Our health is not something that we can guarantee as individuals by taking vitamins or jogging,” she said. “We are dependent upon having clean air, clean water, safe foods and a safe environment for our health.

“If climate change is affecting all of those factors, then it is going to make us sick as well.”

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