HEI
Health Effects Institute

Traffic Pollution and Your Health

Key findings from the largest scientific review on traffic-related air pollution and health to date

Traffic is the main source of air pollution in many cities.

Breathing traffic-related pollution increases your risk of getting sick and dying early.

There is strong evidence linking traffic pollution with

- A higher overall risk of death
- A higher risk of death from heart disease
- A higher risk of death from lung cancer

People exposed to higher levels of traffic pollution are more likely to

- Develop asthma
- Suffer acute respiratory infections (children)

A pollution paradox

In many places, vehicle emissions are dropping, yet overall traffic pollution is rising.

What's reducing traffic pollution?

- Policies limiting tailpipe emissions or where/when people drive
- Technologies for lower-emission engines and cleaner-burning fuels
- Increased use of electric vehicles and other modes of transport

What's increasing traffic pollution?

- Population growth
- Increased urbanization
- Increased economic activity

The bottom line:

Reductions in per-vehicle emissions do not offset the effects of increasing traffic congestion.

Where you live matters

In high-income countries, some pollutants have dropped thanks to new technology and aggressive regulation.

But in many middle- and low-income countries — where rules are more lax and older cars are more prevalent — traffic pollution is holding steady or rising.

Even within high-income countries, historically marginalized communities tend to face worse pollution impacts. Lower-income neighborhoods are often closer to congested roadways due to persistent inequities and unfair housing and infrastructure decisions.

The bottom line:

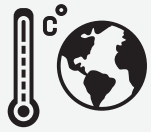
People living in poorer areas generally suffer worse pollution and health effects.

Change is happening...

Understanding traffic pollution's impacts can inform policies that improve health. Many cities, states, and countries are already taking action to curb traffic pollution — and seeing health benefits.

...but it won't come fast.

Despite new mobility trends and the rapid growth in electric vehicles, older combustion vehicles are likely to stay on the road for many years. Much of the world's population is still exposed to heavy traffic pollution, and this is unlikely to change quickly at a global scale.



Many of the steps recommended to address the climate crisis will also reduce air pollution and its health effects.

There is clear need to prioritize benefits for environmental justice communities, which historically have borne the highest burdens from pollution.

The problems that lead to traffic pollution vary from place to place, and so do the optimal solutions. A local view is important.

Where does this information come from?

Special Report 23 of the Health Effects Institute is the most comprehensive review of the evidence on the health effects of traffic-related air pollution to date. It was produced by a panel of 13 experts who analyzed 353 studies conducted over four decades. ***https://tinyurl.com/HEITrafficReport***

What's next?

Traffic-related air pollution remains an important public health concern and deserves greater attention from the public and from policy makers across the globe.

Future HEI studies will help us understand how emerging trends and policies might influence exposures and effects. We're also thinking beyond the tailpipe to understand the impacts from a wider range of factors, such as noise, green space, greenhouse gas emissions, and pollutants generated through wear on roads, tires, and brakes.

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