

HEALTH BENEFITS OF ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

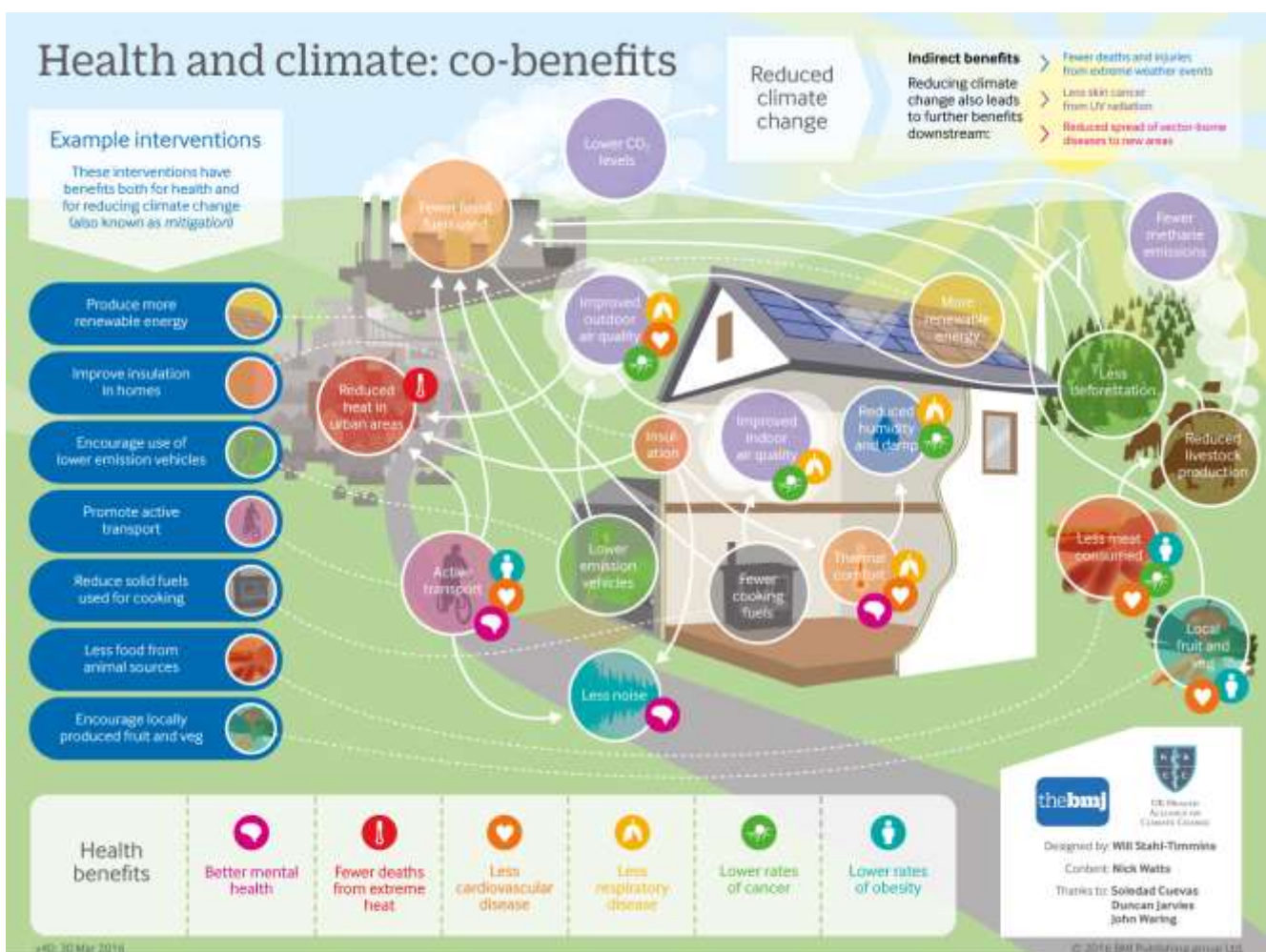
Why does taking action on climate change have a beneficial impact on health?

“Putting in place public policies that prevent additional climate change presents unrivalled opportunities for improving public health.” The economic and social policies that reduce greenhouse gases will also bring substantial health improvements such as reductions in inequalities in health, heart disease cancer, obesity, diabetes, road deaths and injuries and urban air pollution¹.

Ian Roberts was referring to 3 major climate change and health-related issues;

1. Two important determinants of health – human nutrition and movement
2. Contraction and convergence (a framework for reducing carbon emissions resulting in worldwide equitable per capita shares).
3. Population policy and the promotion of family planning

As explained in the Marmot Review “Creating a sustainable future is entirely compatible with action to reduce health inequalities”². We can prioritise policies and interventions that both reduce health inequalities and mitigate climate change by: improving across the social gradient; active travel; the availability of good quality green spaces; the food environment in local areas; and energy efficiency of housing. These interventions will all have a positive long term impact on health including obesity². The “Health and Climate: co-benefits” infographic³ below gives examples of interventions in the use of energy and the human nutrition and movement determinants, illustrating how our health can benefit whilst reducing our impact on climate change. These interventions can be applied in homes and within organisations.



Food: Our current food system contributes to pollution, a reduction in natural resources and to climate change and is a main behavioural driver behind mortality in the UK⁴. A transition to more nutritious and diverse diets (with fewer processed foods and more fruit and vegetables) is projected to result in reduced Greenhouse Gas emissions, as well as likely reductions in non-communicable diseases⁵. Changing dietary habits can prove difficult. However, interventions in schools, care homes and hospitals to offer sustainable food that is more healthy, can support change. The national Food for Life Catering Mark⁶ adopted by the NHS in the East Midlands, provided a comprehensive framework for improving the health and sustainability standards of food served to patients, staff and visitors⁷. See *FPH SIG resource 7 on Sustainable Food Systems*.

Population growth:

Acts as a multiplier of sustainability pressures, including climate change¹⁰. Family planning slows unsustainable population growth and allows people to attain their desired number of children and determine the spacing of pregnancies. Family planning also¹¹;

- prevents pregnancy-related health risks in women
- Reduces infant mortality
- Helps to prevent HIV/AIDS
- Empowers people and enhances education
- Reduces adolescent pregnancies

See also *FPH SIG SD resource 8 on Population Stabilisation & FPH Maternal and Sexual and Reproductive Health Special Interest Groups*.

Human Movement::

Walking, cycling and using public transport instead of driving cuts air pollution and greenhouse gases and increases physical activity. Physical activity is essential for good health and well-being because it can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer, obesity and type 2 diabetes, helps keep the musculoskeletal system healthy and promotes mental wellbeing⁸. Where car use is essential, electric vehicles can reduce the impact on air quality. For example, health and healthcare professionals trialled electric cars in one of the East Midlands NHS Carbon Reduction Project pilots, thereby reducing associated air pollution on their journeys to visit patients⁹. See also the forthcoming *FPH SIG SD Human Movement resource for further details*.

The East Midlands NHS Carbon Reduction Project delivered minimum savings of 2,556 tonnes of CO₂e and between £1.5 and £1.6 million whilst improving wellbeing through trialling more sustainable procurement, food, travel, energy efficiency and renewables in NHS Trusts and Care Homes⁹.



Energy: Reducing carbon emissions through insulating buildings and utilising renewable energy: The World Health Organisation points out that “investments in home insulation have reduced health care costs of chronic respiratory disease in some settings, justifying investments made in large-scale housing improvement programmes. More such cost-benefit evaluation would likely make the case for action even more compelling.”¹² The Nottinghamshire Healthy Housing Referral Service¹³ and the East Midlands NHS Carbon Reduction Project¹⁴ are examples of projects that reduced carbon emissions and unnecessary expenditure on heating, while improving health.

Inequalities, Contraction & Convergence:

As the health impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed, existing inequities will be exacerbated as warming increases, more at 2.0 °C than at 1.5 °C warming. Maintaining the temperature rise to 1.5°C could therefore prevent some of the worst health effects of climate change and improve the effectiveness of adaptation ...¹⁵

Contraction and Convergence is a proposed global framework that aims to reduce overall emissions of greenhouse gases to a safe level that reduces the risk of runaway climate change (contraction), resulting in every country bringing its emissions per capita to a level which is equal for all countries (convergence). Emissions trading can take place within the context of this scientifically calculated equitable carbon budget.¹⁶

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Professional Development Questions

1. Summarise the main health co-benefits of acting on carbon emissions
2. Describe a minimum of 3 interventions in domestic and organisational settings that benefit health and reduce carbon emissions.

FPH General CPD Questions

1. What did I learn from this activity or event?
2. How am I going to apply this learning in my work?
3. What am I going to do in future to further develop this learning and/or meet any gaps in my knowledge, skills or understanding?