

Climate Change Harm Perceptions Among US Adults

There is scientific consensus that climate change poses a significant threat to human health. The direct and indirect effects of climate change and climate change-related extreme weather events (e.g., heat waves, floods, wildfires, droughts) can cause or exacerbate a range of conditions, including heat-related illnesses, respiratory conditions, infectious diseases, injury, and death. Extreme weather events can also disrupt health care delivery, leading to delays and decreased access to health care services. Certain populations, including older adults, pregnant women, and those with chronic diseases or disabilities, are especially vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change.

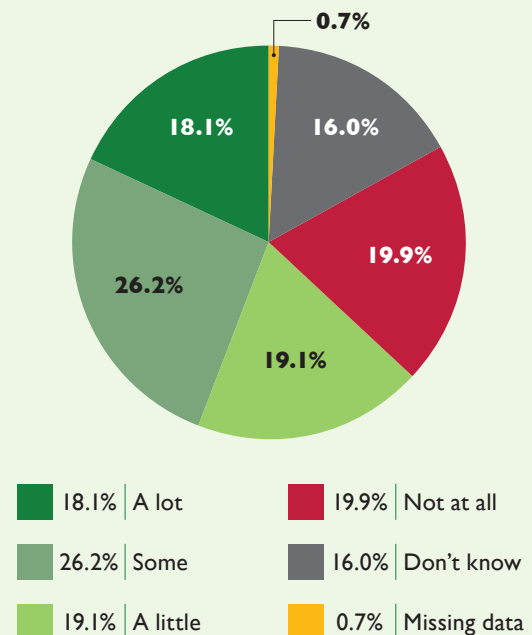
Although the acute impact of climate change on human health is increasingly acknowledged, its effect on chronic diseases, including cancer, receives less attention. Climate change and related extreme weather events can affect each stage of the cancer control continuum, from increasing exposure to cancer risk factors (e.g., ultraviolet radiation, air pollution, toxic chemicals) to causing health system disruptions that can have a negative impact on cancer screening, diagnosis, treatment, and survivorship care. Climate change also has the potential to exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, with underserved communities—who are already disproportionately affected by cancer—also being most vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change. Worse health outcomes in these populations are driven by factors such as increased exposure to cancer risk factors (e.g., higher levels of environmental carcinogens in certain neighborhoods), greater rates of chronic diseases that can increase the risk of severe morbidity or mortality from climate-related conditions (e.g., those with cardiovascular disease are more sensitive to heat stress), and lower ability to respond to and recover from extreme weather events (e.g., due to lower rates of insurance coverage, less access to air conditioning).

Public awareness about the threat that climate change poses to human health is relatively low in the United States (US), and many Americans do not believe themselves to be personally at risk from climate change. Communication efforts are needed to raise awareness about the relationship between climate change and health, particularly among vulnerable groups, and encourage individuals to adopt behaviors that can help mitigate climate change and its negative health effects.

Quick Facts

- Climate change poses a significant threat to human health, including in the context of cancer.
- Climate change can increase exposure to cancer risk factors, negatively affect cancer prevention behaviors, and cause disruptions to cancer care delivery.
- Certain groups, such as children, older adults, people with chronic medical conditions or disabilities, and pregnant women, are especially vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change.
- Underserved communities are disproportionately affected by the negative effects of climate change.
- Public awareness and concern about the threat that climate change poses to human health is relatively low in the US.

How much do you think climate change will harm your health?



Source: HINTS 6 (2022)

Factors Associated with Climate Change Harm Perceptions Among US Adults

A recent study analyzed data from HINTS 6 (2022) to examine climate change harm perceptions among American adults, as well as sociodemographic and information source trust factors associated with these perceptions. The study found that 64% of US adults believe that climate change will harm their health at least a little, while 20% do not believe that climate change will harm their health, and another 16% do not know whether it will harm their health.

In adjusted, weighted regression models, older adults were less likely to believe that climate change will harm their health compared to young adults (aged 18-34), females were more likely to believe that climate change will harm their health compared to males, and those with a college degree or more had greater odds of believing that climate change will harm their health compared to those with a high school degree or less. Non-Hispanic Black/African American and non-Hispanic Asian adults also had higher odds of believing that climate change will harm their health compared to non-Hispanic White individuals. No significant associations were found between climate change harm perceptions and either household income or geographic residence. Greater trust in doctors, scientists, government health agencies, or charitable organizations for cancer information was positively associated with believing that climate change will harm health, whereas greater trust in cancer information from religious organizations was negatively associated with believing that climate change will harm health.

How Can This Inform Your Work?

HINTS data show that climate change harm perceptions are relatively low among US adults and vary by sociodemographic characteristics, as well as trust in different health information sources. Raising awareness of the health impacts of climate change may be a promising strategy for increasing engagement in climate change mitigation strategies and reducing the negative impacts of climate change on health. Increased awareness about the health impacts of climate change may result in greater support for pro-environmental policies and the adoption of pro-environmental behaviors that have co-benefits for cancer prevention, such as active transportation (e.g., walking, bicycling) and plant-based diets. Communication efforts delivered across a range of channels and sources, such as government health agencies and clinicians, are likely needed to reach diverse audiences with information about the health effects of climate change.

Health care providers can play an important role in mitigating the health impacts of climate change by identifying patients who are especially vulnerable and educating them about the ways climate change can affect their well-being, as well as steps they can take to protect their health. This is especially important as HINTS data suggest that some vulnerable groups (e.g., older individuals) may not be fully aware of the risk that climate change poses to their health. However, many providers do not currently feel equipped to discuss climate change with their patients, suggesting a need for additional resources and training to support health care providers in having these discussions.

About HINTS

hints.cancer.gov

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) created the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) to monitor changes in the rapidly evolving field of health communication. The survey data can be used to understand how adults use communication channels to obtain health information for themselves and their loved ones. HINTS data can also help practitioners create more effective health communication strategies. The HINTS survey has been fielded 16 times to date.

HINTS Briefs provide a snapshot of noteworthy, data-driven research findings. They introduce population-level estimates for specific questions in the survey and summarize significant research findings resulting from analyses of how certain demographic characteristics influence specific outcomes. Many Briefs summarize research findings from recent peer-reviewed journal articles that have used HINTS data.

For More Information on Cancer

- Call the NCI Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER
- Visit <https://www.cancer.gov>
- Download NCI publications at <https://pubs.cancer.gov/ncipl/home.aspx>
- Visit [Facebook.com/cancer.gov](https://www.facebook.com/cancer.gov) and <https://www.youtube.com/ncigov>

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