

Air pollution report - WHO

Why in news?

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The report on air pollution and child health was recently released by the WHO on the sidelines of its first ever global conference on Air Pollution and Health.

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What does the report contain?

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- About 93% of the world's children under the age of 15 (1.8 billion children) breathe polluted air every day that puts their health and development at serious risk.

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- This includes 630 million children under 5 years, and 1.8 billion children under 15.

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- Many of these children die, with as many as six lakh estimated to have died in 2016 alone due to complications from acute lower respiratory infections caused by dirty air.

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- In low- and middle-income countries, 98% of all children under 5 are exposed to PM2.5 levels above WHO air quality guidelines and in high-income countries, the figure is 52%.

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- Air pollution also impacts neurodevelopment and cognitive ability and can trigger asthma, and childhood cancer.

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- Children exposed to high levels of air pollution may be at greater risk for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease later in life.

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- It can damage children's lung function, even at low levels of exposure.

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- Also, when pregnant women are exposed to polluted air, they are more likely to give birth prematurely, and have small, low birth-weight children.

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- One reason why children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of air pollution is that they **breathe more rapidly** than adults and so absorb more pollutants.
- They also live closer to the ground, where some pollutants reach peak concentrations at a time when their brains and bodies are still developing.
- In addition, new borns and small children are often at home.
- If the family is burning fuels like wood and kerosene for cooking, heating and lighting, they would be exposed to higher levels of pollution.

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Why the air pollution is high in northern India?

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- Air pollution is choking several cities in the northern States, as changes in temperature and slowing winds trap soot, dust and fine particulate matter.
- Delhi's air quality was on the brink of turning "**severe**" recently, which falls in the 'very poor' category at that time.
- The System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) also said the upcoming days are expected to see a sharp deterioration of air quality in Delhi-NCR.
- This is due to a western disturbance system in the north of India which is bringing moisture and a cyclonic system on the eastern side which is suppressing winds.
- There is also the increased burning of paddy straw in Punjab and Haryana, evident from images released by NASA, which brings the wind from the northwest.
- Its footprint may be growing because of wider use of mechanical harvesters that is producing more waste.
- Burning of agricultural residue also releases large volumes of smoke containing, among other pollutants, highly damaging fine particulates, or PM2.5.
- All this, combined with Delhi-NCR's own pollution sources, could lead to a

spike in pollution.

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- The problem is aggravated by the burning of urban waste, diesel soot, vehicular exhaust, road and construction dust, and power generation.

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What should be done?

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- The **UNEP**'s recent report pointed out that only 8% of the population in the countries of the Asia and the Pacific get to breathe air of acceptable quality.
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- A study of degradation of Delhi's air over a 10-year period beginning 2000 estimated premature mortality to have risen by as much as 60%.
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- With the steady growth in the population of the capital and other cities, the trauma is set to worsen.
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- Although India has nine of the 10 most polluted cities in the world, it has not taken consistent action on pollution.
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- Tens of millions live with ambient air quality that is well short of even the relaxed parameters the country has set for fine particulates, compared with those of the WHO.
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- Hence, India should now give high importance to the WHO warning about air pollution.
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- The 'severe' air quality rating for Delhi and poor conditions prevailing in other cities in the Indo-Gangetic Plain should compel a decisive shift in policy.
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- The Centre and the State governments need to get into crisis mode to dramatically reduce emissions.
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- They must address the burning of carbon, which is a direct source, and emissions with oxides of nitrogen and sulphur from vehicles that turn into fine particulates through atmospheric reactions.
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- Failure to take sustainable and urgent measures will inflict long-term harm on public health, affecting children even more by putting them at higher risk for diseases.

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- An innovative approach could be to use climate change funds to turn farm residues into a resource, using technological options such as converting them into biofuels and fertilizers.

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- From an urban development perspective, large cities should reorient their investments to prioritise public transport, favouring electric mobility.

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- Governments should make the use of personal vehicles in cities less attractive through strict road pricing mechanisms.

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- Also, sharply escalated, deterrent parking fees can be implemented in crowded areas of the sprawling cities.

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- Finally, public pressure must force governments to act, if they delay action on the critical issue of pollution control.

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Source: The Hindu

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