

# More than nine in ten children exposed to deadly air pollution

Air pollution is “stunting children’s brains” and affecting their health in more ways than was previously suspected, the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) said on Monday.

In a call for concrete policy pledges from governments across the world to tackle the problem, the UN health agency [reports](#) that more than nine in 10 youngsters breathe air that is so polluted, “it puts their health and development at serious risk”.

The WHO findings – launched on the eve of the agency’s first [Global Conference](#) on Air Pollution and Health in Geneva – include the estimate that 600,000 children died from acute lower respiratory infections caused by polluted air in 2016.

Polluted air is poisoning millions of children and ruining their lives – *WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus*

“The enormous toll of disease and death revealed by these new data should result in an urgent call to action for the global community, and especially for those in the health sector,” the WHO report says, noting that the impact of air pollution both inside and outside the home is worst in low and middle-income countries.

Among the WHO report’s other findings are data indicating that pregnant women are more likely to give birth prematurely when they are exposed to dirty air.

Their babies are also prone to be underweight and small, according to WHO, which also highlights how air pollution can trigger asthma and childhood cancer, while also hampering neuro-development.

“Polluted air is poisoning millions of children and ruining their lives,” said WHO Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. “Every child should be able to breathe clean air so they can grow and fulfil their full potential.”

One reason why children are especially vulnerable to polluted air is that they breathe more rapidly than adults, absorbing more toxins, WHO says.

Youngsters are also more exposed to pollutants that stay closer to the ground at a time when their bodies and brains are still developing, the UN agency report continues, adding that newborns and young children are more susceptible to household air pollution in homes that use polluting fuels for cooking, heating and lighting.

As part of its call for action from the international community, WHO is recommending a series of “straightforward” measures to reduce the health risk from ambient fine particulate matter, or PM2.5.

These include accelerating the switch to clean cooking and heating fuels and technologies, promoting the use of cleaner transport, energy-efficient housing and urban planning.

“Air pollution is stunting our children’s brains, affecting their health in more ways than we suspected,” said Dr Maria Neira, Director, Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health at WHO. “But there are many straight-forward ways to reduce emissions of dangerous pollutants.”

WHO is also supporting low emission power generation, cleaner, safer industrial technologies and better municipal waste management” to reduce community air pollution, Dr Neira added.