Climate Change and Health
Communication guide

Research results for action
At a time of intersecting public health crises of COVID-19 and climate change, understanding public perceptions of the health risks of climate change is critical to inform risk communication and support the adoption of adaptive behaviours. In Canada, very few studies have explored public understandings and perceptions of climate impacts on health.
Given the urgency of communicating and acting on climate change combined with the evolving discourse regarding public health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to understand Canadians’ perceptions of the health risks of climate change. 3014 Canadians responded in this nationally-representative survey done in December of 2020. The 116-question survey measured prior consideration of the link between climate change and health, affective assessment of climate health impacts, unprompted knowledge of climate health impacts, and concern about a range of climate-related impacts.
STUDY OBJECTIVES

(1) To determine perceptions of the link between climate change and health;
(2) To evaluate Canadians’ level of concern around specific health impacts of climate change; and
(3) To explore how climate and health risk perceptions can inform public engagement and communications.
FINDINGS
CONCERN

To contextualize the concerns Canadians have about the health impacts of climate change, we asked survey respondents to rate their level of concern about climate change impacts in four categories: health impacts, biophysical impacts, economic impacts and impacts on national security.

- Health impacts of climate change are as concerning as biophysical and economic impacts.
- People with more education and towards the ‘left’ of the political spectrum were more concerned about all impacts.
HOW MUCH HAD YOU THOUGHT ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

Q: Before taking this survey, how much had you thought about how climate change might affect people’s health?

Highest Consideration
- Increased level of education
- “Left” political leaning

Prior consideration of the link between climate change and health is higher among people with more education and who are politically left-leaning.
PERCEIVED IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON HEALTH

Q: How would you rate the impact of climate change on people’s health?

Most Canadians perceive climate change as bad for people’s health

Highest Perception of Impact

- Women
- "Left" leaning
- Higher education levels
HEALTH IMPACTS

To assess health impacts of highest concern to Canadians, we asked respondents their levels of concern for 15 different health impacts of climate change. These impacts fell into five categories: water and food borne diseases, air quality, mental health, temperature-impacts and infectious diseases.

- Water- and food-related impacts are of high concern, among other climate health impacts.
More than half of Canadians can name one or more health impact of climate change.
IMPLICATIONS FOR HEALTH AND CLIMATE COMMUNICATION
Implications for health and climate communications

Key findings of public perceptions

- Most Canadians perceive climate change as harmful to human health

Implications for health and climate communications

- Public health framing in climate communications may be effective to some extent with Canadians
- The majority of people are likely open to information about the health risks of climate change, given that they accept that it is harmful.
Implications for health and climate communications

Key findings of public perceptions

- People towards the left on the political spectrum and those with more education are more concerned about climate health impacts than the rest of the Canadian population.

Implications for health and climate communications

- Health framing in climate communications is likely to be more successful in reaching those already worried about climate change.
Key findings of public perceptions

- Canadians who are more concerned about climate change are also more concerned about the health impacts of climate change.

Implications for health and climate communications

- To increase awareness and concern on climate health impacts, a communicator must be aware of the specific audiences that may (or may not) agree with the message.
Implications for health and climate communications

Key findings of public perceptions

- Canadians have higher concern for future generations, food and water security, and respiratory impacts from air quality, and lower concern for infectious diseases, mental health and heat stroke impacts.

Implications for health and climate communications

- Communicators using public health framings in climate change communications may choose to focus on specific health impacts of high or low concern, depending on their goals.
- Climate communicators hoping to reach the largest audiences with messages that mean most to Canadians, might use the areas of highest concern in their messaging.
Other health and climate change resources

Visit our Health topic on the Climate Atlas of Canada for more information and resources on how climate change impacts our health.

https://climateatlas.ca/topic/health

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