Environment provides a solid platform for good health. It is an accepted fact that premature death and diseases can be prevented, and to a significant degree, through a healthier environment.

“A healthy environment underpins a healthy population,” says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General.

An estimated 12.6 million people died as a result of living or working in an unhealthy environment in 2012 – nearly 1 in 4 of total global deaths, according to WHO estimates. Environmental risk factors, such as air, water and soil pollution, chemical exposure, climate change and ultraviolet radiation, contribute to more than 100 diseases and injuries.

In India, 30% of all deaths in the country are attributable to unhealthy environment, according to the latest global assessment of the burden of disease from environmental risks (2012). In terms of Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs), a quarter of the total DALYs are lost due to environmental hazards. At least 315 deaths per 100,000 population occur every year due to environmental pollution. Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) have the largest share with 207 deaths per 100,000. Increased incidence of vector-borne and communicable diseases has also been reported due to environmental pollution.

What is polluting the environment?

As more and more people move to cities seeking better opportunities, the problem is expected to escalate. Globally, more than 1 in 2 people live in cities. By 2050, it is expected to grow to 2 in 3 people. Heavy traffic, limited green spaces, air pollution, noise and violence all impact our health. Rural areas, known for environmental tranquility, are also being subsumed in this expansion. Indoor cooking, especially in rural and peri-urban households, is a major health hazard.

In India, rapid urbanization and economic growth has resulted in increased need for energy. For its energy needs, the country is over-dependent on coal, a potent source of air pollution. Untreated pollutants from industry, unclean domestic sources and agricultural practices extensively pollute our air, land and water bodies. Unsafe disposal of biomedical and e-waste too contribute to environmental pollution.

Addressing environmental pollution

There’s an urgent need for investment to reduce environmental risks, including at homes and workplaces. Such investments can significantly arrest the rising trend of morbidity and mortality, thus bringing down healthcare costs.


The advent of Sustainable Development Goals, with their underpinning holistic philosophy, present an excellent opportunity to make a lasting contribution to reducing the disease burden attributable to environmental factors, thus facilitating healthy lives and promoting well-being of all people.

The World Health Organization is providing global guidance on strategies for reducing the burden of pollution due to air pollutants, chemicals in soil and water (like mercury) etc.

A concerted and coordinated effort by all stakeholders and a multisectoral approach is imperative to address the situation optimally.

Initiatives by the Indian government

In India, the government is looking at innovative solutions. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan encourages citizens to adopt cleanliness in all spheres of life and is particularly relevant and timely. The ‘Smart Cities’ initiative assures urban planning, building energy-efficient housing and good network of public transport, all of which are environment friendly. Citizens’ participation is in-built, thus ensuring sustainability.

Promoting more equitable access to clean fuels by removing blanket subsidy on cooking gas to high-income group and including more households from low-income group in the LPG distribution list...
are appreciable steps to address household air pollution. Similarly, initiatives for cleaning the major rivers will help curb water-borne diseases.

The government has also constituted a multisectoral Steering Committee to address air pollution, both household and ambient; WHO India is a member of this forum.

Smoke-free legislation to reduce exposure to second-hand smoke is already in place in India viz. Cigarette and other Tobacco Products Act, 2003. India is also a signatory to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, 2004.

In conclusion, environmental health interventions can make a valuable and sustainable contribution to reducing the global disease burden and improving the well-being of people everywhere. We, therefore, owe it to ourselves and succeeding generations to do all we can to keep the environment healthy. And thereby stay healthy ourselves.