



First Nations Health Authority  
Health through wellness

# CLIMATE HEALTH 101: Risks and Resilience



## WHAT IS CLIMATE HEALTH?

Climate health refers to the relationship between climate-driven changes and human health. Climate change, which combines with other natural and human-made stressors, can affect human health in two main ways:

1. By changing the severity or frequency of existing health problems.
2. By creating unprecedented or unanticipated health threats in places where they have not previously occurred.

## CLIMATE CHANGE IN BC

Climate change is already affecting the environment in British Columbia (BC) in a variety of ways:

- Changing weather patterns and extreme weather conditions (e.g., heat waves, storm surges)
- More frequent flooding and forest fires
- Rising coastal water levels and melting glaciers
- Changing growth seasons and decreased availability of traditional foods and medicines
- Lower inland water and aquifer levels
- Increasing pollen counts, pests, invasive species and vector-borne diseases

These hazards can affect health and wellness in direct and indirect ways. For example, hotter summers can cause direct cardiovascular illnesses and premature mortality through heat stress, while indirectly aggravating asthma and allergies through increased pollen counts. Rising temperatures can impact food security and safety in many ways, such as reduced growing seasons and heat-induced algal blooms that cause toxins in seafood. Mental health is also impacted by climate change as emergencies, rapid changes in the land and waters, and a sense of uncertainty about the future can cause anxiety and grief.

### **IMPACT ON FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES**

The deep cultural connection that many BC First Nations feel to the land, water and air makes them particularly susceptible to climate impacts on health and wellness. For example, access to traditional foods and medicines can be compromised by changes in the abundance, health, and behavior of plants and animals caused by climate change. Coastal erosion, extreme weather, floods and fire events can result in damage to areas of cultural importance or limit access to cultural activities. Such changes influence the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of First Nations people. The negative effects of colonialism on the social determinants of health further amplify the impacts of climate change.

### **FIRST NATIONS LEADERSHIP IN CLIMATE HEALTH ACTION**

Climate change has also created an opportunity for First Nations communities to demonstrate leadership and resilience. Communities have been adapting to environmental change since time immemorial and have knowledge and skills that can benefit not only their own communities but also others in the face of a changing climate.

First Nations in BC are leading the way in climate health adaptation initiatives, such as:

- Organizing opportunities for knowledge sharing and skill building to protect and enhance community food security including through traditional food harvesting, preservation, and storage
- Identifying and mapping important areas, plants and animals for monitoring and protection
- Working with Elders and Knowledge Holders to understand changes taking place on the land and to preserve traditional knowledge
- Revitalizing access to traditional territories through culture camps and on-the-land training
- Undertaking community climate health assessments and developing action plans

The First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) has launched the Indigenous Climate Health Action Program (ICHAP), a province-wide funding initiative to support resilience within BC First Nations. More information on the program can be found at:

[www.FNHA.ca/what-we-do/environmental-health/climate-health-action-program](http://www.FNHA.ca/what-we-do/environmental-health/climate-health-action-program)

### **LEARN MORE ABOUT CLIMATE ACTION IN BC AND CANADA:**

- <http://www.climatetelling.info>
- <https://retooling.ca/>
- <https://www.indigenousclimateaction.com/>
- <https://www.toolkit.bc.ca/>

**For any questions, please contact ICHAP at: [climate.health@fnha.ca](mailto:climate.health@fnha.ca)**