

WHO talking points
Launch of UNEP Global Chemical Outlook
Press Conference
Wednesday 5 September 2012

As highlighted in the report, WHO estimates show that more than 25% of the global burden of disease is linked to environmental factors. Of this, chemical exposures accounted for at least 4.9 million deaths in 2004 – and this is just the tip of the iceberg because data is only available on a very small number of chemicals.

- The sound management of chemicals is essential for the protection of human health. The report released today by UNEP further underscores the need for action to prevent exposure to hazardous chemicals.
- Chemicals we have known to be hazardous for a long time, such as lead, mercury, asbestos and air pollution, are still not adequately addressed and continue to impact on public health. This is particularly the case in developing countries which typically have fewer resources for chemicals risk management. The projected growth in chemicals production and use in the developing world is likely to result in greater negative effects on health if sound chemicals management is not put in place.

In 2011, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that globally, 4.9 million deaths (8.3% of the global total of deaths in 2004) and 86 million Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs¹) (5.7% of the global total of DALYs in 2004) were attributable to environmental exposure and management of selected chemicals in 2004 for which data were available.

- This figure includes indoor smoke from solid fuel use, outdoor air pollution and second-hand smoke, with 2.0, 1.2 and 0.6 million deaths annually. These are followed by occupational particulates, chemicals involved in acute poisonings, and pesticides involved in self-poisonings, with 375,000, 240,000 and 186,000 annual deaths respectively.
- Fifty-four percent of the global burden of disease (counted in DALYs) due to the chemicals assessed by the WHO is borne by children under the age of 15 years (Prüss-Ustün et al 2011).

Some examples:

- About 800 000 children each year are affected by lead exposure, leading to lower IQ, with the highest exposure levels occur predominantly in children in developing countries.
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- Some 9% of the global disease burden of lung cancer is attributed to occupation and 5% to outdoor air pollution.
- Unintentional poisonings kill an estimated 355 000 people each year. Two-thirds of these deaths occur in developing countries and are the result of exposure to toxic chemicals, including pesticides.

Despite actions taken in the past, chemical emergencies that affect human health and require a health-system response continue to occur. Examples:

- the dumping of toxic waste in Côte d'Ivoire in 2006 resulted in some 85 000 health-related consultations;
- and mass lead poisoning from mining activities in Zamfara State in Nigeria, discovered in March 2010, has poisoned thousands of children causing the death of hundreds.
- These are examples of what is occurring despite many international instruments on chemicals management intended to protect human health.

This “gap” between policy formulation and what happens in practice needs to be resolved at international and national levels.

- The economic analysis presented in the Global Chemicals Outlook demonstrates that sound chemicals management is as valid an area for investment as education, transport infrastructure, direct health care services and other essential public services. This could foster the creation of many green, decent and healthy jobs and livelihoods for developed and developing countries.
- Effective long-term management of chemicals and wastes lays the foundations for a thriving Green Economy, for ensuring a healthier environment, and for a fairer distribution of development benefits across societies.

To counter the negative health impacts arising from exposure to hazardous chemicals, substantial health gains could be made by sectors such as environment, health, transport and agriculture working better together, as well as mainstreaming health impact assessment into decision-making about infrastructure and development projects.