

CHILDREN UNDER 15 AT SERIOUS RISK FROM POLLUTED AIR: WHO

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Every day about 93% of the world's children under the age of 15 (1.8 billion children) breathe polluted air that puts their health and development at serious risk, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said in a new report that puts into numbers the devastating impact that air pollution is having on the global population's health.

Tragically, many of these children die, with as many as six lakh estimated to have perished in 2016 alone due to complications from acute lower respiratory infections caused by dirty air, according to WHO's report.

The report on air pollution and child health released on the eve of the WHO's first ever global conference on Air Pollution and Health on Tuesday reveals that when pregnant women are exposed to polluted air, they are more likely to give birth prematurely, and have small, low birth-weight children.

Air pollution also impacts neuro-development and cognitive ability and can trigger asthma, and childhood cancer. Children exposed to high levels of air pollution may be at greater risk for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease later in life, the WHO said.

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

Breathe rapidly

One reason why children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of air pollution is that they breathe more rapidly than adults and so absorb more pollutants. They also live closer to the ground, where some pollutants reach peak concentrations — at a time when their brains and bodies are still developing.

In addition, newborns and small children are often at home. If the family is burning fuels like wood and kerosene for cooking, heating and lighting, they would be exposed to higher levels of pollution.

"Air pollution is stunting our children's brains, affecting their health in more ways than we suspected," Dr. Maria Neira, director, Department of Public Health, Environmental and Social Determinants of Health at WHO, said in a release accompanying the report.

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