Air pollution report – WHO

Why in news?

\n\n

The report on air pollution and child health was recently released by the WHO on the sidelines of its first ever global conference on Air Pollution and Health.

\n\n

What does the report contain?

\n\n

\n
- About 93% of the world's children under the age of 15 (1.8 billion children) breathe polluted air every day that puts their health and development at serious risk.
\n
- This includes 630 million children under 5 years, and 1.8 billion children under 15.
\n
- Many of these children die, with as many as six lakh estimated to have died in 2016 alone due to complications from acute lower respiratory infections caused by dirty air.
\n
- In low- and middle-income countries, 98% of all children under 5 are exposed to PM2.5 levels above WHO air quality guidelines and in high-income countries, the figure is 52%.
\n
- Air pollution also impacts neurodevelopment and cognitive ability and can trigger asthma, and childhood cancer.
\n
- Children exposed to high levels of air pollution may be at greater risk for chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease later in life.
\n
- It can damage children's lung function, even at low levels of exposure.
\n
- Also, when pregnant women are exposed to polluted air, they are more likely to give birth prematurely, and have small, low birth-weight children.
\n

- 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.
\n
- They also live closer to the ground, where some pollutants reach peak concentrations at a time when their brains and bodies are still developing.
\n
- In addition, new borns and small children are often at home.
\n
- If the family is burning fuels like wood and kerosene for cooking, heating and lighting, they would be exposed to higher levels of pollution.
\n

\n\n

Why the air pollution is high in northern India?

\n\n

\n
- Air pollution is choking several cities in the northern States, as changes in temperature and slowing winds trap soot, dust and fine particulate matter.
\n
- Delhi's air quality was on the brink of turning "**severe"** recently, which falls in the 'very poor' category at that time.
\n
- The System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting and Research (SAFAR) also said the upcoming days are expected to see a sharp deterioration of air quality in Delhi-NCR.
\n
- This is due to a western disturbance system in the north of India which is bringing moisture and a cyclonic system on the eastern side which is suppressing winds.
\n
- There is also the increased burning of paddy straw in Punjab and Haryana, evident from images released by NASA, which brings the wind from the northwest.
\n
- Its footprint may be growing because of wider use of mechanical harvesters that is producing more waste.
\n
- Burning of agricultural residue also releases large volumes of smoke containing, among other pollutants, highly damaging fine particulates, or PM2.5.
\n
- All this, combined with Delhi-NCR's own pollution sources, could lead to a

spike in pollution.
\n
- The problem is aggravated by the burning of urban waste, diesel soot, vehicular exhaust, road and construction dust, and power generation.
\n

\n\n

What should be done?

\n\n

\n
- The **UNEP**'s recent report pointed out that only 8% of the population in the countries of the Asia and the Pacific get to breathe air of acceptable quality.
\n
- A study of degradation of Delhi's air over a 10-year period beginning 2000 estimated premature mortality to have risen by as much as 60%.
\n
- With the steady growth in the population of the capital and other cities, the trauma is set to worsen.
\n
- Although India has nine of the 10 most polluted cities in the world, it has not taken consistent action on pollution.
\n
- Tens of millions live with ambient air quality that is well short of even the relaxed parameters the country has set for fine particulates, compared with those of the WHO.
\n
- Hence, India should now give high importance to the WHO warning about air pollution.
\n
- The 'severe' air quality rating for Delhi and poor conditions prevailing in other cities in the Indo-Gangetic Plain should compel a decisive shift in policy.
\n
- The Centre and the State governments need to get into crisis mode to dramatically reduce emissions.
\n
- They must address the burning of carbon, which is a direct source, and emissions with oxides of nitrogen and sulphur from vehicles that turn into fine particulates through atmospheric reactions.
\n
- Failure to take sustainable and urgent measures will inflict long-term harm on public health, affecting children even more by putting them at higher risk for diseases.

\n
- An innovative approach could be to use climate change funds to turn farm residues into a resource, using technological options such as converting them into biofuels and fertilizers.
\n
- From an urban development perspective, large cities should reorient their investments to prioritise public transport, favouring electric mobility.
\n
- Governments should make the use of personal vehicles in cities less attractive through strict road pricing mechanisms.
\n
- Also, sharply escalated, deterrent parking fees can be implemented in crowded areas of the sprawling cities.
\n
- Finally, public pressure must force governments to act, if they delay action on the critical issue of pollution control.
\n

\n\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu

\n

