

# Communicating About Air Pollution During COVID-19

## Best Practices For Clinicians

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Measures to slow the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to temporary improvements in air quality in many cities around the globe. When factories shut down, traffic levels fell and fossil fuel production plummeted,<sup>1</sup> reports from news and social media touted cleaner skies free from severe air pollution—some for the first time in years.

As the issue of air pollution and its effects on public health are thrust into the spotlight of the COVID-19 crisis, clinicians must share thoughtful and evidence-based data with patients and in the public discourse to prevent the spread of misinformation, promote the need for clean air solutions and create public demand for clean air.

**A few recent studies have claimed a direct link between air pollution and COVID-19. While more research is still needed, \* Vital Strategies epidemiologists can state a few things with certainty:**

While there is not definitive proof that short-term exposure to high levels of air pollutants contributes to COVID-19 infections and deaths, there is evidence suggesting that long-term exposure to poor air quality may make people more susceptible to getting sick or dying from COVID-19. Air pollution leads to more than 5 million deaths each year, primarily from causes ranging from heart and lung diseases to diabetes.<sup>2</sup> The leading diseases caused by air pollution—cardiovascular disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes and cancer among them—are the same underlying conditions that make people much more likely to become severely ill or die from COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Because of this shared pathway, improving long-term air quality would likewise improve lung and heart health, and reduce susceptibility to the severe impacts of COVID-19 and potentially other infectious diseases.

Air quality is likely to worsen as economies restart and travel resumes, and in many countries, leaders are exploiting the economic crisis to roll back environmental regulation and enforcement.<sup>4</sup> Solving air pollution is an urgent public health issue that must be addressed with sustainable policy solutions.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING ABOUT AIR POLLUTION DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

As misinformation mounts during the pandemic, it is important to share evidence-based, credible information with your patients, coworkers and the public at large to promote and reinforce support for clean air policies and prevent the backsliding of environmental regulations. Prematurely promoting links between air pollution and COVID-19 may backfire should further research disprove them. *Inspire: Health Advocates for Clean Air* recommends the following tips:

### Air Pollution, COVID-19, and Health

- Use the latest data available and cite only credible research when talking about links between air pollution and COVID-19.

- Do not promote air pollution's direct links to COVID-19 without credible, established evidence (yet to be reported as of 27 August 2020).
- Consider how air pollution (especially PM<sub>2.5</sub>) levels have changed during COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequently rebounded during reopening stages, as well as what these changes in air quality might be attributed to (e.g. lower traffic, shutting of factories, etc).
- Conversations around anecdotal observations might come up (e.g. A patient might say, "The air quality in Country X is bad and that's why there are a lot of COVID-19 cases there"). Explain to patients the difference between anecdotal observations and credible research.
- Emphasize the need to adopt long-term strategies to improve air quality to address the chronic health harms of air pollution (such as heart and lung diseases, hypertension and diabetes).
- When conversations on masks arise, remind audiences that masks are effective for reducing the spread of COVID-19, but are far less effective at reducing exposure to harmful air pollutants.
- Emphasize that COVID-19 crisis is a not win for air pollution advocates and came at a large-scale loss of life and unsustainable economic cost.

### Improving Air Quality and Reopening Society

- Remind audiences that any air quality improvements due to COVID-19 are temporary, and that without specific interventions to reduce emissions, air quality will worsen again as societies reopen.
- Talk about the sustainable, cost-effective air quality improvements available through reducing emissions at their source.
  - Highlight the need for safe public transport.
  - Economic stimulus should fund green initiatives, instead of subsidizing dirty energy or other carbon-emitting industries.
- Encourage patients and coworkers to demand that governments forge a reimagined pathway toward a healthy, sustainable new normal, which takes the nation/region's poorest people into consideration.
- Emphasize that the COVID-19 pandemic is not an excuse to roll back environmental regulations when restarting the economy and that environmental rules and their enforcement have significant returns on investment in the form of reduced health costs and social gains.
- Reinforce the message that temporary air pollution improvements due to recent restrictions come at great economic and social costs (in terms of livelihoods, lives lost, etc.) and are not environmental health gains.
- Do not use the COVID-19 crisis as an example of how governments and corporations can take drastic action to improve air quality. It is counterproductive for the public, private industry or policymakers to link air pollution solutions to severe economic disruption.

<sup>1</sup> <https://energyandcleanair.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CREA-Europe-COVID-impacts.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.healthdata.org/infographic/global-burden-air-pollution>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6924e2.htm?s\\_cid=mm6924e2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6924e2.htm?s_cid=mm6924e2_w)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/climate/trump-environment-rollbacks.html>

\* As of 27 August 2020