

# Avoidable burden

## *Diseases caused by environmental factors*

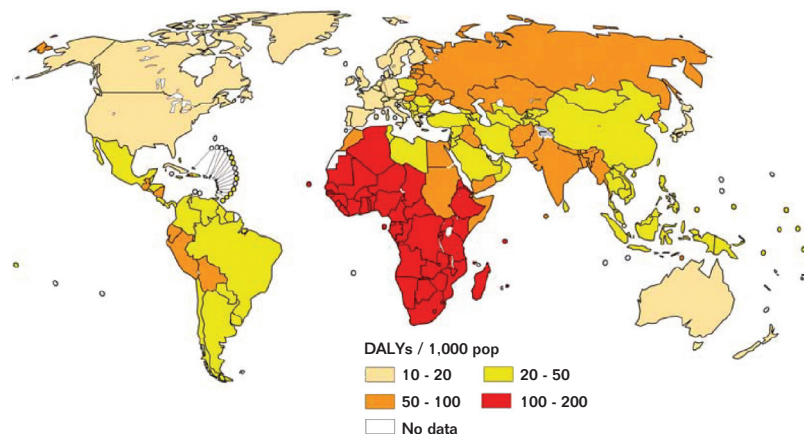
■ According to a recent WHO report, about a quarter of the world's sick and more than one-third of sick children owe their afflictions to environmental factors. This could be averted through well-targeted interventions

■ About 25 per cent of all deaths in the developing world are due to environmental factors while 17 per cent of mortality in industrialised countries was environmentally caused ▼

■ Another WHO report ascribes 85 of the 102 major disease categories to environmental factors

■ More than 25 per cent of male patients owe their illness to environmental factors. The corresponding figure for women is a little less: 22 per cent

■ 23 per cent of premature mortality in 2002 was due to environmental factors. Among children (0–14 years of age), the proportion of deaths due to environmental factors was as high as 36 per cent



Cardiovascular diseases	2.6 million
Diarrhoeal diseases	1.7 million
Lower respiratory infections	1.5 million
Cancers	1.4 million
Chronic obstructive Pulmonary disease	1.3 million
Road traffic crashes	470,000
Unintentional injuries	400,000

■ Diarrhoea and lower respiratory tract infections were among diseases, which can be ascribed to environmental factors. The two diseases were the most lethal in terms of disability adjusted life years (DALYs, the sum of years of potential life lost due to premature mortality and the years of productive life lost due to disability): ▼

Disease	Million daly's per year	Environmentally- caused as percentage of total cases	Reason
Diarrhoea	58	94	Unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene
Lower respiratory infections	37	41	Air pollution, indoor and outdoor
Unintentional injuries other than road traffic injuries	21	44	Work place related accidents, animal bites, contact with venomous plants, exposure to radiation, electric currents, natural forces (floods, storms, earthquakes)
Malaria	19	42	Poor water resource, housing and land use management which fails to curb vector populations effectively
Road traffic injuries	15	40	Poor urban design or poor environmental design of transport systems
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease	12	42	Occupational exposures to airborne particulates, exposures to indoor smoke, outdoor air pollution

■ Most of the environmentally triggered diseases also rank as the biggest killers. Diseases with the largest absolute number of deaths annually are caused by environmental factors

■ Globally, the per capita number of healthy life years lost to environmental risk factors was about five times greater in children under five years of age than in the total population. The difference was even greater (7–10 fold greater) for major diseases, such as respiratory infections, diarrhoea, malaria and malnutrition

■ Preventing harmful environmental exposure to children under the age of 5, could save about four million lives a year, mostly in developing countries

■ Many environmental health interventions are economically competitive with other kinds of health-sector interventions and often yield benefits that go beyond the immediate health improvements