



Introduction

"I've never had allergies before. I don't understand why I started to develop them all of a sudden."

Complaints such as the one above are rising in number. Patients are increasingly presenting to physicians' offices with symptoms that can be directly attributed to climate change. Physicians are in a unique position to inform their patients about the risk factors they can potentially control.

We attempt to provide physicians with sample script responses for three scenarios where the effects of climate change on health can be clearly portrayed to a patient, as well as steps they can take to act.

Scenarios

Scenario 1 – Allergic Rhinitis

Patient: "I've never had allergies before. I don't understand why I started to develop them suddenly."

Physician: "Do your symptoms tend to start after anything specific?"

Patient: "When it gets close to spring, I wake up with itchy eyes, a runny nose, and sneeze a lot. I never experienced this as a child and don't know why it would start now."

Physician: "Due to an increase in temperatures and carbon dioxide in the air, the amount of pollen produced has increased as well as its ability to cause allergies.¹ As a result, our pollen seasons have gotten longer,¹ and it's possible that this has caused you to develop your allergies."

Patient: "I see. Is there anything I can do about my allergies?"

Physician: "Absolutely. I would encourage you to start checking pollen counts on a daily basis² – the National Allergy Bureau has a great resource for this online.² That way, you can try to minimize any exposure on days where the pollen count is high.² Additionally, allergy medications such as antihistamines will work better if you take them before your symptoms start to develop.² Finally, I would encourage you to support organizations, such as the American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology, that advocate for their patients and work to hold policymakers accountable."²

Scenario 2 – Asthma

Patient: "Recently I've needed to use my rescue inhaler much more frequently than I used to."

Physician: "Is there anything that happens shortly before you use your rescue inhaler that could be causing you to need it?"

Patient: "Not particularly. My daily routine has been the same for the last 5 years. I haven't started any new medications or changed my diet."

Physician: "It's possible that climate change is playing a role in your frequent asthma attacks. Warmer temperatures have the ability to interact with and change properties of pollutants in the air.³ These air pollutants can then directly damage the lining of your airways, causing irritation and inflammation."³

Patient: "What can I try myself to make my asthma better?"

Physician: "There are plenty of steps you can take. It would be beneficial for patients with asthma to live more than 200 meters, or 0.12 miles, away from a major street so you are less exposed to car exhaust.⁴ Try to limit your driving during rush hour and keep the windows in your car closed even while stopped.⁴ Lastly, I would recommend you don't exercise outside when the air quality is poor.⁴ You can check the air quality forecast on any weather website or phone application."

Scenario 3 – Insomnia

Patient: "I typically go to sleep at 10 pm and wake up at 6 am. However, I haven't felt well rested during the day for years. I've had a sleep study in the past which didn't show anything and follow all of the recommended habits for good sleep hygiene."

Physician: "Great. And I see your depression and anxiety screening questions are negative. Do you have any significant stressors I may have missed?"

Patient: "Nothing out of the ordinary."

Physician: "Well, studies have shown that temperature greatly influences your sleep quality.⁵ Because rising temperatures during the day have also led to increased temperatures at night, climate change is one factor that could be contributing to your lack of restful sleep."⁵

Patient: "I didn't know that the temperature could affect your sleeping habits that way. What can I do if I can't control the temperature outside?"

Physician: "Research on the connection between climate change and insomnia is still ongoing. For now, I would recommend being conscious of the temperature in your home. As this connection is still being studied, supporting organizations such as the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and National Sleep Foundation can help. This is a topic we need to continue to raise awareness about."

Conclusion

- In an already tight medical education curriculum, medical students are not taught how to connect the dots between climate change and health when it comes to patient care. As lifelong learners, it is imperative we educate ourselves on this important topic and provide our patients with accurate facts so they may take an autonomous approach to their health via advocacy.
- Giving a name to otherwise common and vague symptoms turns an abstract concept into a tangible problem. Ultimately, this allows patients to grasp the concrete, individualized impact climate change continues to have on their health.

References

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