When climate change affects human health

Zoonotic diseases, heatwaves and wildfires already posing health risks

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For The Straits Times

The climate crisis is often treated as an environmental problem, but the planetary heating could also have severe repercussions on hu-
man health. Last month, the World Health Organisation (WHO), in its Special Report on Climate Change and Health, warned that the world must limit warming to 1.5 degree C above pre-industrial levels to avoid millions of climate change-related deaths.

While climate change and health are not directly separate issues, drawing connections between the two are crucial.

When temperatures rise above the 1.5 degree C threshold recommended by climate scientist, the risk of heat-related deaths increase, the Global Commission on Adaptation and Resilience recommends. The commission raised the alarm in a recent report: “Health has a central role in climate change.”

Countries have pledged to limit global warming to under 2 degree C, preferably 1.5 degree C, above pre-industrial levels – but already more than 150 million lives are at risk from heatwaves and extreme temperatures, according to the World Health Organisation.

Heat is also a significant threat to human health, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where outdoor work is common. In these areas, the risk of heat illness and death is much higher.

Singapore is no immune to the health risks of climate change. For example, Singapore has been listed in the top 10 hottest cities in the world based on data from NASA’s satellites, and has experienced some of the hottest days in its history.

The link between high temperatures and health is further supported by a study published in the Lancet Global Health magazine, which showed that the world is experiencing up to 30,000 premature deaths with every 1 degree C rise in temperature.

The report found that in Singapore, about 5 per cent of the healthcare infrastructure comes from evasive emergency hospitals and healthcare-related costs, which is a significant proportion of the national health budget.

The healthcare sector also contributes to climate change. In Singapore, the healthcare sector is responsible for 3 per cent of the country’s greenhouse gas emissions, according to the National Healthcare Group (NHS).

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