Climate change and air pollution threaten the health of everyone, but they pose outsize risks for pregnant women and their babies. Children who are exposed to air pollution in the womb are also at risk of long-term health harms. Climate change causes heat waves, wildfires, and superstorms, all of which place pregnant women and their babies at risk.

Of all countries in the developed world, the US has the highest maternal mortality rate. Stark racial disparities are driving our maternal mortality crisis: Black moms are dying at four times the rate of white and Hispanic mothers. Addressing air pollution and climate change to protect pregnant women and their babies is a matter of racial justice.

All those who carry and give birth to babies—and those who love them—should demand strong policies that fight climate change and air pollution.

**Climate change makes air pollution worse and hits communities of color the hardest.**

**Climate Heat**

Heat is harmful for pregnant women. Pregnant bodies are already working hard to keep mom and baby healthy. Adding the hard work of keeping cool can overload body systems causing dangerous health outcomes such as premature birth from dehydration.

Heat also has the unfortunate effect of increasing other harmful pollution such as ozone, and sometimes heatwaves can also trap dangerous air pollutants like smoke.

In the US, people of color are more likely to be exposed to extreme heat compared to white people. Some research has shown that Black pregnant women and mothers are at especially high risk of health harm from heat compared to other women.

**Climate Wildfires**

Wildfires, driven by climate change, are becoming more frequent and longer in duration. Wildfire smoke is dangerous to breathe and can lead to preterm birth. Children born to women exposed to wildfire smoke are more likely to suffer respiratory infections. Moreover, wildfire risk is not equally distributed. One study found that majority-Black, Hispanic, and Native American census tracts had significantly higher vulnerability to harm from wildfires compared to majority-white census tracts.
Air pollution in our everyday lives can affect pregnant moms.

PM2.5, or fine particulate matter, is created from burning fossil fuels. Power plants, diesel engines, and gasoline vehicles all emit PM2.5. Wildfire smoke has high concentrations of PM2.5. The tiny particles penetrate deep into the body, affecting the lungs, bloodstream, and organs. This type of air pollution has been found in the placentas of pregnant women. Racial disparities in air pollution exposure mean that pregnant Blacks, Hispanics, and other people of color may be facing unjust risks.

Ozone is a powerful lung irritant, also known as smog. It forms in the atmosphere when certain chemicals combine with heat and sunlight. Heavy traffic in hot neighborhoods produces high levels of ozone, causing breathing problems. Higher ozone levels can significantly increase preterm birth risk.

Volatile Organic Compounds, or VOCs, are chemicals that get emitted as gas. They come from cars, trucks, and oil and gas operations. They are also found in household products like paints and paint strippers, and personal care products, such as perfume and cosmetics. Breathing VOCs can lead to respiratory issues and damage the central nervous system and organs. Some VOCs can even cause cancer. Some research indicates that exposure to VOCs in the womb can increase the risk of low birth weight as well as respiratory disease in childhood.

High blood pressure: Children of mothers exposed in their last trimester of pregnancy to high levels of PM2.5 were at a 61% higher risk of elevated blood pressure. High blood pressure in children can lead to early heart attack, stroke, or other serious health issues.

What can pregnant women do to protect themselves from air pollution?

Pay attention to the air quality in your area. Find out about your air at airnow.gov or purpleair.com/map.

Limit outdoor exercise during extreme heat and when pollution levels are on the rise.

Wear a particulate respirator mask near wildfire smoke to protect your lungs. This type of mask is tested and approved by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). It will have two straps that go around the head and the words “NIOSH” and either “N95” or “P100” printed on it. (Surgical masks, cloth masks, masks with one strap, and masks with ear loops are NOT effective against wildfire smoke.)

Follow guidance from the CDC during emergencies. See: Safety Messages For Pregnant, Postpartum, and Breastfeeding Women During Natural Disasters and Severe Weather.

JOIN THE FORCE. Learn the latest information about air pollution and climate change. Help us protect families by creating a safe, stable, and equitable future where all pregnant moms and their children breathe clean air.

For sources, please visit: www.momscleanairforce.org/sources-pregnancy-airpollution

NOVEMBER 2021