

Beyond the Forecast: Experiences with Extreme Weather and Concerns About Climate and Health

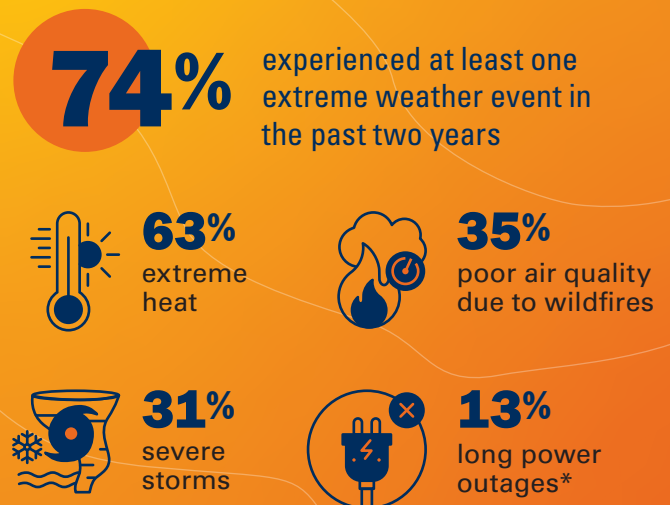
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Key Findings

- 74% of people age 50 and older experienced at least one extreme weather event in the past two years; this includes extreme heat, poor air quality due to wildfires, severe storms, and long power outages.
- The majority of older adults said they are concerned about the impact of climate change on their own health (59%) and on the health of future generations (74%).
- 27% of adults age 50 and older reported not having enough reliable information on the impact of climate change on their health, and another 28% were unsure.
- 6% of older adults said a health care provider has talked with them about preparing for climate-related health emergencies; of these, 64% took action as a result.

Extreme weather events impact human health in both direct and indirect ways, affecting access to clean air, water, food, housing, and health care resources. Older adults may be more vulnerable to the health effects of extreme weather, yet little is known about their personal experiences with and concerns about changes in climate. In August 2024, the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging asked a national sample of adults age 50 and older about their experiences with extreme weather events, concerns about the effects of climate change, sources of information about the health impacts of climate change, and discussions with health care providers on how to prepare for climate-related health emergencies.

Most people age 50+ have experienced an extreme weather event



*May be due to factors other than extreme weather
Poll fielded August 2024

Older adults' experiences with extreme weather events

Overall, 74% of adults age 50 and older reported personally experiencing at least one of the following extreme weather events in the past two years (from August 2022 to August 2024):

- Extreme heat (63%)
- Poor air quality due to wildfire smoke (35%)

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- Severe storms (such as tornadoes, flooding, blizzards, and hurricanes) (31%)
- Long power outages (more than a day)* (13%)

**This experience may be due to factors other than extreme weather.*

Concerns about the impact of climate change on health

Over half of adults age 50 and older (59%) said they are concerned (24% very, 35% somewhat) about the impact of climate change on their health, with 23% not very concerned, and 18% not at all concerned. Older adults who were more likely to be concerned about the impact of climate change on their health included those who:

- reported fair or poor mental health (72% vs. 57% of those reporting excellent, very good, or good mental health)
- had experienced an extreme weather event in the past two years (70% vs. 26% of those who had not)
- lived in urban areas (69% vs. 54% of people living in suburban or rural areas)
- were women (65% vs. 51% of men)
- had annual household incomes less than \$60,000 (63% vs. 55% of individuals with incomes of \$60,000 or more)

Concerns about effects on future generations

Overall, 74% of older adults said they are concerned (43% very, 31% somewhat) about the effects of climate change on the health of future generations. Adults age 50 and older who had experienced an extreme weather event in the past two years were more likely to be concerned about the health of future generations than those who had not (83% vs. 45%). In addition, women were more likely than men to be concerned about the effect of climate change on the health of future generations, as were older adults living in urban areas compared with those living in suburban or rural areas.

Anxiety and stress related to climate change

Overall, 5% of older adults reported feeling a lot of anxiety or stress related to climate change, 31% said they felt some, 33% felt a little, and 31% did not feel any. Those who had experienced one or more extreme weather events in the past two years were more likely to report feeling anxiety or stress related to climate change than those who had not experienced such events (44% vs. 14%). Older adults reporting fair or poor mental health or physical health were also more likely to feel anxiety or stress related to climate change compared with those reporting excellent, very good, or good mental health or physical health.

The majority of people age 50+ are concerned about the impact of climate change on health

Percent who are very or somewhat concerned about the impact of climate change on...

their own health:
59%



the health of future generations:
74%



Concerns about other potential effects of climate change

The majority of adults age 50 and older said they are concerned (very or somewhat) about the following potential effects of climate change:

- More extreme heat events (70%)
- Air pollution and poor air quality (69%)
- Loss of basic infrastructure (such as the electric power grid, water services, transportation, and telecommunications) (68%)
- More frequent severe storms (68%)
- Changes in infectious diseases (66%)

Getting information on the health impacts of climate change

In all, 76% of people age 50 and older reported getting information about the health impacts of climate change from one or more of the following sources:

- TV / radio (54%)
- Newspaper / magazine / journals (41%)
- Social media (22%)
- Family or friends (20%)
- Health care provider (9%)
- Other sources (12%)

Overall, 46% of people age 50 and older reported feeling they have enough reliable information about the potential impacts of climate change on their health, 27% said they do not have enough reliable information, and 28% were unsure. Non-Hispanic Black (38%) and Hispanic (33%) older adults were more likely than non-Hispanic White older adults (25%) to report not having enough reliable information.

Talking with health care providers about preparing for climate emergencies

Few adults age 50 and older (6%) said a health care provider has talked with them about how to prepare for climate-related health emergencies (such as

To be ready for extreme weather events, older adults, their families, and their support networks should consider developing emergency preparedness plans together.

extreme heat or storms). Older adults who reported having a health problem or disability that limits their daily activities were more likely than those without such limitations to report that a health care provider has talked with them about preparing for climate emergencies (8% vs. 5%). Among all older adults who have discussed climate-related health emergencies with a health care provider, 64% reported taking action to prepare for climate-related health emergencies as a result of the conversation.

Implications

The majority of older adults reported personally experiencing at least one extreme weather event in the past two years, and many are concerned about the impact of climate change. Efforts by local, state, and federal **policymakers** to help people prepare for and recover from extreme weather events should consider the unique needs—and input—of older adults. Supporting older adults before, during, and after these events can include disaster management plans tailored to the needs and preferences of older adults. Policies can encourage infrastructure that is resilient to extreme weather and awareness and education about the health risks of extreme weather.

For **older adults and their families**, this report reinforces the importance of proactive planning for climate-related health emergencies. Extreme weather events can be particularly detrimental to older adults who live with chronic health conditions,

disabilities, or in lower income households. To be ready for these events, older adults, their families, and their support networks should consider developing emergency preparedness plans together and communicating those plans to all those close to them. Families can prepare by ensuring consistent access to necessary medications and supplies, identifying evacuation routes and shelters, and improving the structural readiness of their homes. Preparedness can include having backup power supplies, updating insulation, and improving air filtration. Additionally, given that climate change-related stress is more common among those with mental or physical health challenges, older adults and their families can discuss types of additional emotional and logistical support that may be needed in the event of an extreme weather emergency.

This report highlights a notable gap in discussions about climate-related health emergencies between health care providers and patients. Given the substantial risk extreme weather events may have on older adults' health, **health care providers** should assess for climate-related risks, especially for those older adults with chronic conditions or disabilities. Health care providers can play an important role in educating patients and their family members or caregivers about heat-related illness

prevention, emergency preparedness, and respiratory risks from poor air quality, even in brief communications during otherwise busy patient visits. Health care teams can also connect older adults to key community resources such as cooling and warming centers. Finally, in their role as patient advocates, health care providers can encourage system-wide preparedness for extreme weather events.

Community and social service organizations play a vital role in increasing awareness of risks and preparedness for extreme weather among older adults. There is a need for preparedness planning that prioritizes older adults who may be particularly vulnerable to extreme weather such as those in low-income households, with health conditions, or with disabilities. Social service agencies can help meet this need by facilitating access to reliable information, offering transportation and shelter assistance during climate-related health emergencies, and advocating for more inclusive disaster response planning. Expanding partnerships between health agencies, local governments, and community organizations can ensure older adults receive needed support to stay safe during extreme weather events.

Data Source and Methods

This National Poll on Healthy Aging report presents findings from a national household survey conducted exclusively by NORC at the University of Chicago for the University of Michigan's Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. This survey module was administered online and by phone from August 5th – 27th, 2024, to a randomly selected, stratified group of U.S. adults age 50–94 (n=3,486), with an oversample of non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, and Asian American and Pacific Islander populations. The survey completion rate was 36% among panel members invited to participate. The margin of error is +/- 1 to 4 percentage points for questions asked of the full sample and higher among subgroups.

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For interactive data tables, see <https://michmed.org/MDKQ2>

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