What’s Up With the Weather?

September 8, 2014 By Kate Ferguson

Most scientists agree that global warming drives climate change and that it affects not only the environment and economics, but also our physical and mental health.

After Hurricane Sandy swooped down on the Eastern seaboard of the United States, people from Maine to Florida were left reeling. In New York City, the storm surge inundated neighborhoods in lower Manhattan and flooded the area’s subway tunnels. Experts say that as the Earth continues to warm we could expect more of these ferocious storms in the future.

According to the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, although no one can say that any single weather event was directly caused by climate change, our current weather is the product of our changing climate. What’s more, global warming raises the probability of extreme weather events.

Interestingly, scientists have been studying climate change and noting major weather developments since the early 1800s. In the late 1960s, researchers began focusing attention on the melting of ice in the Arctic Sea. This phenomenon is one of the factors feeding global warming. With the loss of icy surfaces that reflect the sun’s rays, the land heats up as it absorbs more solar radiation.

As a result, sea levels go up, and sometimes rain comes down really hard, wind speed increases and we have a Hurricane Sandy rampaging through town.

Naturally, these storms are scary because of the damage they can do. “The overall health effects of a changing climate are likely to be overwhelmingly negative,” says the World Health Organization (WHO). This is because climate change affects several key determinants of health: clean air, safe drinking water, sufficient food and secure shelter.

In a report published in the journal Environmental Health Perspectives, a volunteer for the Occupy Sandy relief effort drew a graphic picture of the storm’s potential to precipitate a health crisis. “What they found was frightening,” said Nastaran Mohit, the volunteer. “There were literally thousands of elderly people trapped in the upper floors of these buildings. The hallways were pitch black. Many apartments were without functioning plumbing. People were living in their own feces.”

But unsanitary conditions aren’t the only health risks generated in the aftermath of any extreme

weather event. For example, when heat waves hit, death rates rise. Scorching temperatures can also boost the levels of pollutants in the air, and that worsens respiratory and heart disease, especially among the elderly. Similarly, extreme heat stimulates the release of pollen and other airborne allergens. These asthma triggers can make life almost unbearable for those who suffer from the illness.

A post-Sandy report revealed residents lacked safe food and water, and many of the chronically ill faced medical emergencies when they couldn't access medications. Says the WHO: "All populations will be affected by climate change, but some are more vulnerable than others."

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