

Alberta scores a D for air quality

Pollution killing 6,000 Canadians every year

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With wind chills plummeting southern Alberta into -40 C territory this week, it has been somewhat difficult to identify with the dangers of global warming. Come to think of it, an early spring isn't sounding like a bad idea.

Thankfully, making smart environmental choices doesn't need to depend upon a fear of climate change. (Although that fear is alive and well in some parts of the world. Spring flowers have bloomed earlier than ever this year in the U.K., with daffodils spotted as early as Jan. 16.)

You see, the emissions that come out of the tailpipes of our cars and the smokestacks of the oilsands and power plants are bad for our health, as well as the environment.

Every year, there are about 6,000 deaths in Canada due to short-term exposure to air pollution, according to the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation's Report Card on Canadians' Health, released this week.

And 69 per cent of those deaths come in the form of cardio and cerebrovascular disease (heart attacks, strokes, etc.). Despite those figures, only 13 per cent of Canadians have made the connection between air pollution and cardiovascular disease.

"Since the early 1990s, a growing body of evidence . . . has documented increased rates of heart attack, and more hospitalizations for serious heart diseases such as heart failure, and stroke, after both short and long-term exposure to polluted air," says Dr. Beth Abramson, a cardiologist and spokesperson for the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

And don't chalk all those deaths up to smog out East, because Alberta scored a D in the report card, with levels of particulate matter ranking right up there with B.C.'s Lower Mainland.

Stephen Samis, an Ottawa-based director of health policy for the Heart and



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Calgary's downtown office buildings swathed in steam on a cold day.

Stroke Foundation, says the study showed Alberta's air quality dipping closer to Ontario and Quebec levels.

"There's this idea that this is A) an urban problem and B) an eastern problem, and that's entirely not true," Samis says. "We can see that Alberta is trending upwards."

That's not surprising when you consider that Alberta is responsible for one-third of Canada's emissions.

Samis says that the development in the oilsands is conducive to producing high measurements of particulate matter. "From what I've learned about what causes particulate matter, that is a perfect storm," he says, noting the matter can travel 800 kilometres.

Research shows that even short-term exposure to particulate matter is dangerous. Every 10-microgram per cubic metre increase in long-term exposure to fine particulate matter can increase the risk of dying from heart disease or stroke by as much as 76 per cent.

Across Canada, levels vary widely, with just 15 micrograms per cubic metre in Manitoba, compared to 25 micrograms in Alberta and 40 micrograms per cubic metre in Ontario.

Environment Canada estimates that at least 30 per cent of Canadians are exposed to higher than acceptable levels of fine particulates.

And while 63 per cent of Canadians believe air quality has a major effect on the health of Canadians, there's a disconnect for people who live on the Prairies, where 84 per cent of respondents believe the quality of air in their community is good to excellent.

But Samis says that's not the case and urges Albertans to advocate for the Air Quality Health Index to be rolled out across Canada.

The index, in place in Toronto, Nova Scotia and B.C., not only measures air quality, but explains what it means to your health and how you should adapt physical activity.

No such index is in place in Alberta, but you can track air quality by visiting theweathernetwork.com.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation's report card offers recommendations for governments to take action to reduce air pollution (see sidebar).

"Increased investments in public transit within urban centres, planning more neighbourhoods that encourage walking, and decreasing Canadians' dependency on cars . . . will not only address concerns about the environment, but may ultimately reduce the burden on our health-care system," Samis says.

For insight, couple this information on air quality with a Statistics Canada study released last week that found Calgarians and Edmontonians are the heaviest car-users in any major Canadian centres, putting our habits more in line with smaller cities such as Kitchener, Ont., than with metropolitan centres such as Toronto.

Calgary also has the distinction of having more low-density neighbourhoods than any other major city in Canada. But Calgarians stranded in far-flung suburbs aren't the only ones not using transit. Even those who live within five kilometres of City Hall are more likely to drive than their counterparts in other major cities.

The question is, what can we do to change that?

Naheed Nenshi, a volunteer with the Better Calgary Campaign, a non-partisan group dedicated to better municipal government, says the city needs to make transit more appealing.

"For us to solve many of our problems -- pollution, congestion, et cetera -- we need to make transit the preferred choice, not just for people who don't have any other choice," he says.

The Mount Royal College instructor and Harvard graduate says customer service needs to come first.

"The system needs to be welcoming and comfortable and safe," he says.

A few of the problems he points out: Ticket vending machines that don't give change, route-planning issues and empty C-Train stations.

In most of the older transit stations, there's room for newsstands, Nenshi says. "Why wouldn't transit just give that space away? Then you have someone in the station and that makes a big difference to people's safety."

As for route planning, he cites Foothills Hospital as an example. "Thousands of people work there and they do shift changes between 6 and 7 a.m. and p.m., but you can't get there by transit at that time in the morning. Our system doesn't recognize them."

Instead of the hospital building another giant parkade, Nenshi says the money could have been better spent on increased transit.

"We're never going to have a world where transit is the right choice for everyone, but it should work for more people," he says.

The Green Guide runs every Friday in Real Life. Find all the articles online at calgaryherald.com/greenguide.

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What needs to change?

According to the Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation's poll, 95 per cent of Canadians think the government should do more to reduce air pollution.

The foundation says governments can do this by:

- Rolling out the Air Quality Health Index across the country. The index, piloted in Toronto, Nova Scotia and B.C., helps you understand what the air quality rating means to your health.
- Strengthening legislation to ensure emission controls result in cleaner air.

- Providing public awareness and incentive programs to encourage action to reduce air pollution.
- Increasing investments in public transit within and between urban centres across the country, including investments in high-speed rail between Edmonton and Calgary.
- Ensuring that all wood-burning stoves and fireplaces conform to particulate emission requirements.
- Allocating at least seven per cent of federal transportation infrastructure funding to facilitate walking and cycling.
- Working with developers to create neighbourhoods that promote decreased car dependency.

Find the ever-growing guide at CalgaryHerald.com/greenguide

How to Do Your Part

- Walk, bike or ride transit when you can.
- Plan your trips better.
- Car share (calgarycarshare.ca) or carpool (carpool.ca).
- Don't idle, which produces a lot of dangerous particulate matter.
- Get involved. Write to your politicians and encourage investment in public transit and sustainable communities. Go to heartandstroke.com to find a template letter urging action on air pollution.
- Advocate for the Air Quality Health Index across Canada.
- Wood-burning stoves create one-third of all fine particulate matter in winter. If you buy a new Canadian Standards Association-approved fireplace, you'll cut that by 85 to 90 per cent.

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