

People who are elderly or have chronic conditions

Margaret Loughnan and Matthew Carroll

Key points

- Older people and those living with chronic health conditions are more vulnerable to the impact of climate change.
- This vulnerability is influenced by a myriad of other factors including social isolation, lack of financial resources, inappropriate housing design and inadequate access to services.
- There is a pressing need to develop targeted public health strategies to support these vulnerable groups.
- Community service organisations play a lead role in supporting these groups at the local level and need to be provided with the skills and resources necessary to help them meet the demands of a climate changed future.

Introduction

There is growing recognition of the public health implications of global climate change (Costello *et al.* 2009). Particular attention needs to be paid to the impacts on the health and wellbeing of vulnerable groups, especially older people and those with chronic health conditions. The interaction between of health issues and reduced physiological and thermoregulatory reserve, often in combination with socio-economic factors, makes these groups more susceptible to the impacts of a changing climate, especially in light of population ageing. As a result, there is a critical need for improved public health policy and adaptation planning.

Significant risks are posed by extreme weather events such as extended heatwaves, bushfires and tropical cyclones or severe storms causing flooding. These events are predicted to increase in frequency and intensity in a climate-changed future (Alexander & Arblaster 2009). Those with chronic health conditions or disabilities, on low incomes, and who are socially isolated will be at an increased risk. These groups are over-represented among older people, compounding the problem and placing them in the high-risk category. Extreme weather events often require evacuation or confine people to their homes without sufficient access to necessities for extended periods of time. They also characteristically lead to the failure of social and technological infrastructure and support services, such as loss of electricity, communications and emergency response services. When all of this is taken into consideration, climate change induced stress and disruption will be detrimental