

A Pediatrician's Prescription for the Future: Vote for Climate Health

By Trisha Roth, MD, FAAP

For more than 55 years, I have called the Southern California coast home. As a pediatrician, mother of four, and grandmother to eleven, I have spent countless hours outdoors watching my children and grandchildren play sports and enjoying my own daily four-mile walks along the coastline.

But the outdoors I have always cherished is changing.

I now plan my walks around air quality, heading out earlier or later to find healthier conditions. I see smog on the horizon, pollution on windshields, and ash on the sand after fires. Artificial turf becomes dangerously hot, and unhealthy air can keep children from playing sports outdoors. Having lived in Santa Monica and Laguna Niguel, I have also witnessed landslides and coastal erosion reshape the places we love.

As a pediatrician, I understand what these changes mean for our health. Children's lungs and immune systems are still developing, making them particularly vulnerable to air pollution. Extreme heat can cause dehydration and heat illness, while wildfire smoke can aggravate asthma and damage respiratory health. When children cannot safely play outside, they lose opportunities for exercise, social connection, and healthy development.

Older adults face their own risks. Aging can make it harder for the body to regulate temperature, while heart and lung conditions and certain medications can increase vulnerability to heat and polluted air. Across generations, climate change threatens our ability to live healthy, active lives.

These are not distant threats. They affect how we live today, and the consequences will follow our children and grandchildren into the future.

That is why climate health must be a voting issue.

The air we breathe, the energy we use, the safety of our communities, and our preparedness for extreme heat and wildfires are shaped in part by public policy. Elected

officials make decisions about clean energy, pollution, transportation, public health, and infrastructure. Those choices can either reduce climate-related health risks or allow them to grow.

We cannot prevent every wildfire, heat wave, or landslide. But we can support policies that reduce pollution, accelerate the transition to clean energy, protect vulnerable populations, and help communities prepare for a changing climate.

Voting is one of the most important ways we can influence those decisions. Before casting a ballot, learn where candidates stand on climate and public health. Consider whether their policies protect children's development, safeguard older adults, and create healthier communities for everyone. Ask candidates to make these priorities part of their agenda, and hold elected leaders accountable for their actions.

This is not simply a political preference. It is a commitment to prevention, evidence, and the health of the people we serve and love. We may disagree on many issues, but clean air, safe places to play, and healthy communities benefit us all.

When I walk along the coast, I want to enjoy the ocean without calculating when it is safe to breathe the air. I want my grandchildren and the children I treat to play outdoors without dangerous heat and pollution dictating their activities. I want people to remain healthy and active as they age.

My lifetime of involvement in public health policy has taught me that safeguarding children's health requires a continuous, unyielding commitment to rewriting the rules of their environment. Whether contesting municipal zoning laws decades ago or pushing for statewide climate action today, a pediatrician's duty has always extended beyond the exam room and directly into the architecture of public policy.

Our health, our children's futures, and the well-being of generations to come are at stake. Make climate health a voting priority for all of us.