

New evidence from WHO on health effects of traffic-related noise in Europe

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Traffic-related noise accounts for over 1 million healthy years of life lost annually to ill health, disability or early death in the western countries in the WHO European Region. This is the main conclusion of the first report assessing the burden of disease from environmental noise in Europe, released today by WHO/Europe. Noise causes or contributes to not only annoyance and sleep disturbance but also heart attacks, learning disabilities and tinnitus.

“Noise pollution is not only an environmental nuisance but also a threat to public health,” says Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe. “We hope that this new evidence will prompt governments and local authorities to introduce noise control policies at the national and local levels, thus protecting the health of Europeans from this growing hazard.”

Among environmental factors in Europe, environmental noise leads to a disease burden that is second in magnitude only to that from air pollution. One in three people experiences annoyance during the daytime and one in five has disturbed sleep at night because of noise from roads, railways and airports. This increases the risk of cardiovascular diseases and high blood pressure.

The new publication presents the results of an international study, coordinated by WHO/Europe and supported by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), that reviews the evidence on health effects, provides guidance to quantify risks from environmental noise and estimates the burden of disease in western European countries. Better surveillance and data collection are needed in south-eastern Europe and central Asia, where a lack of exposure data inhibits estimates of the extent of health effects in these parts of the Region.

“This new review of evidence is WHO’s contribution to the policy process in the European Union. We hope that it can influence the update of the European Union directive to include stricter limit values for noise pollution, and that it can be extended to other parts of the Region,” comments Rok Ho Kim, Scientist, Noise and Health at WHO/Europe, who coordinated the WHO project to draw up the report.

“To protect public health from environmental noise, collaboration between WHO/Europe, the European Commission and the European Environment Agency

is increasingly strengthened, with the aim of implementing in a synergistic way the 2010 Parma Declaration and the European Union's noise-related directives. This collaboration is enabled by the common noise assessment methodological framework (CNOSSOS-EU) being developed by the European Commission," says Dr Stylianos Kephelopoulos, coordinator of CNOSSOS-EU.

This publication is primarily for policy-makers, experts, supporting agencies and other stakeholders that need to estimate and act on the effects of environmental noise. It provides the basis for revised WHO guidelines on noise, which Member States requested at the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, held in Parma, Italy in 2010.

For questions about the data contained in the guidelines, contact:

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<http://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/sections/press-releases/2011/03/new-evidence-from-who-on-health-effects-of-traffic-related-noise-in-europe>