LANCET COUNTDOWN: TRACKING PROGRESS ON HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE
In collaboration with Wellcome

A decade tracking progress on health and climate change

SOUTH AFRICA

LANCET COUNTDOWN ON HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE
DATA SHEET 2026

Health and Climate Change in South Africa

The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change tracks the connections between health and climate change. In its tenth iteration, the 2026 Global Report shows that the health impacts of climate change have escalated, and frequently accelerated, in the decade since the Paris Agreement came into force.

This document draws on findings from the 2026 Lancet Countdown Global Report to present key insights for South Africa.

Climate change is increasing heatwave exposure in South Africa, placing vulnerable populations at greater risk of heat-related illness and mortality, while limiting safe physical activity and disrupting sleep.

Extreme drought has become substantially more widespread in South Africa, threatening water availability, food security and livelihoods.

Air pollution imposes a substantial health and economic burden in South Africa. Expanding household and road transport electrification powered by renewable electricity can reduce harmful air pollution and protect health.

Heat and Health

Exposure to high temperatures threatens lives and health, increasing the risk of heat-related illness and mortality. Vulnerable groups, including older adults, young children, pregnant women, and those with pre-existing conditions, face the greatest risks.

87.4% of heatwave days experienced by people in South Africa were directly attributable to climate change between 2021 and 2025. Children under one year of age and adults over 65 in South Africa each experienced an average of approximately four heatwave days annually between 2021 and 2025, around two additional days per year compared with 1986–2005. This represents increases of 119% and 110%, respectively. (Indicator 1.1.1)

LIVED EXPERIENCE

During recent heat waves, I was trying to ensure an elderly relative was not exposed to excessive heat. A lack of information on the specific vulnerability of the elderly was a barrier and understanding why keeping the elderly cool is important. Risk communication tools would have been useful to allow me to better explain how climate change will continue to cause very hot days and that this needs to be addressed.

Anonymous, member of the health community, South Africa

The average annual monetised value of heat-related mortality among people aged over 65 in South Africa was US$1.38 billion between 2021 and 2025, equivalent to approximately 79,500 average annual incomes. This was 161% higher than in 2000–2004. (Indicator 4.1.2)

People in South Africa were exposed to approximately 463 hours annually in which heat posed a moderate or higher risk of heat stress during moderate outdoor physical activity (e.g., brisk walking) between 2016 and 2025, approximately 65 hours (16%) more than the annual average in the 1990s. (Indicator 1.1.2)

People in South Africa lost an estimated 32.6 hours of sleep annually due to high night-time temperatures between 2021 and 2025, approximately 0.6 hours more per year than in 1986–2005. (Indicator 1.1.4)

Drought and Health

Drought threatens water availability, food security and livelihoods, with consequences for health and wellbeing. In South Africa, extreme drought has become substantially more widespread, while wildfire-smoke-associated mortality has declined.

An average of approximately 31% of South Africa's land area experienced at least one month of extreme drought annually between 2021 and 2025, compared with approximately 11% in 1981–1990. (Indicator 1.2.2)

Energy Transition and Health

Fossil fuel combustion and the use of polluting household fuels contribute to harmful air pollution, increasing the risk of respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and premature mortality. Expanding renewable electricity generation and its use in households and road transport can reduce exposure to harmful air pollution and protect health while lowering greenhouse gas emissions.

In 2023, the monetised value of years of life lost due to air pollution in South Africa amounted to US$19.25 billion, equivalent to approximately 4.8% of national GDP. (Indicator 4.1.4)

In 2023, electricity accounted for 49.2% of household energy use in South Africa, an increase of 4.3 percentage points from 2016. (Indicator 3.1.2)

In 2023, none of the road transport energy came from electricity. (Indicator 3.1.3)

Renewable sources accounted for 8.2% of South Africa's electricity generation in 2023. Expanding renewable electricity generation can support electrification across households and transport, reducing harmful air pollution from fuel combustion and protecting health. (Indicator 3.1.1)

Testimonials were collected by The Geneva Learning Foundation as part of efforts to elevate health worker voices and recognize their lived experiences as valuable evidence in climate and health policy.

Romanello M, Walawender M, Israelsson J et al. The 2026 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: A decade of escalating health harms and a decisive moment for all. The Lancet 2026; published online October 2026. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(26)01779-4
World Health Organization. Health and environment scorecard: South Africa. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2025.