



# Health and the environment

*Published March 2011*

*Report 78 pages*

Our surroundings can influence our health through a variety of channels—through exposure to physical, chemical and biological risk factors or by triggering changes to our own behaviour or the behaviour of those around us. Such effects may be direct (such as injury or death) or indirect (through changes in lifestyle and health behaviours).

The environment has the potential to affect physical health (for example, respiratory problems due to air pollution) and mental wellbeing (for example, poor mental health associated with drought conditions). Conversely, there are natural and modified features of the environment (such as green space and water fluoridation) which benefit health.

There is a growing awareness that humans, through their intervention in the environment, play a vital role in exacerbating or reducing health risks.

Environmental factors include 'natural' features (such as temperature and ultraviolet radiation) and aspects of our surroundings which have been created by humans (such as housing and transport).

## **Examples of the report's detailed findings include:**

- From official records, bushfires killed 815 people in Australia between January 1851 and December 2010 (see pages 14-15).
- The most common adverse health outcomes in relation to air pollution are disorders of the respiratory and cardiovascular systems (see pages 27-29).
- A large study found that people living in more walkable neighbourhoods (characterised by connected streets, high residential density and pedestrian-oriented shopping) were less likely to be obese than people living in less walkable areas (see pages 37-39).
- A study using data from the National Health Survey showed that overcrowding was responsible for 30% of the health gap between Indigenous adults living in remote areas and the non-Indigenous population (see Pages 50-52).

## **Classroom discussion**

What is a green space and how can green space affect health?

How would indoor air quality affect health?

How can food safety affect health?

How can extreme weather events affect health?