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Professor Prashant Kumar

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Air pollution and what we can do about it

Air pollution causes respiratory illness and death across the world. What's needed is global action to tackle it. Meanwhile here's what you can do to help protect yourself.

World Health Organisation figures link air pollution and respiratory deaths.

"Air pollution, a mix of gaseous and particulate matter such as nitrates, sulphates, silica, iron and black carbon, is linked to heart disease, strokes, lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and respiratory infections. Children and the elderly are most at risk," says Professor Prashant Kumar, Chair in Air Quality and Health and the founding Director of the Global Centre for Clean Air Research (GCARE) at the University of Surrey.

Sources include road dust, vehicle emissions, industry and barbecues. Household air pollution from sources such as cooking with solid fuels claims 4.3 million lives annually.

What can be done?

"We can use more low-emission or electric vehicles and more mass transport. Motorists should close windows and set the AC to 'recirculate' while at the lights. Flagging up high pollution areas means pedestrians could choose safer routes.

"Hedges planted beside busy open roads also help," says Kumar, who is researching green barriers under the iSCAPE project.

He adds: "Air pollution affects us all. We need global collaboration to tackle it." ■