



Impact of Climate Change on Health Risks for People with Disabilities in Vulnerable Populations; A Review

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ABSTRACT

Climate change has emerged as a significant global challenge with serious consequences for environmental stability and human health. Among the most affected groups are people with disabilities, particularly those living in vulnerable communities where access to healthcare, infrastructure, and emergency services is limited. This study examines the impact of climate change on health risks faced by people with disabilities, focusing on how environmental hazards such as heat waves, floods, droughts, and severe storms increase their vulnerability. Individuals with physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial disabilities often experience additional barriers during climate-related disasters, including limited mobility, inaccessible emergency information, disruption of medical services, and separation from caregivers. These challenges can worsen existing health conditions, increase the risk of infectious diseases, and contribute to psychological stress and trauma. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, discrimination, and inadequate infrastructure further intensify these risks, particularly in low-income and disaster-prone regions. The study highlights evidence from previous research showing that people with disabilities are frequently excluded from disaster planning and response systems, which reduces their ability to cope with environmental crises. This review is aimed at the study the impacts of climate change, climate adaptation and public health strategies that integrate disability considerations into disaster preparedness, healthcare systems, and policy frameworks in order to protect vulnerable populations and promote resilient communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change has become one of the most pressing global issues of the 21st century. It affects not only the environment but also economic stability and human health (Arogundade *et al.*, 2026). In simple terms, climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperature, rainfall patterns, and other atmospheric conditions. These changes are largely driven by human activities such as burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial expansion. As a result, the world is experiencing more frequent and intense environmental events including heat waves, floods, droughts, storms, and rising sea levels (Darboei *et al.*, 2026). These environmental disturbances pose serious risks to communities worldwide, particularly those already living in vulnerable conditions (Yeshiwas *et al.*, 2026).

People with disabilities are among the groups most affected by climate-related challenges. Worldwide, more than one billion people live with some form of disability, making them a significant part of the global population (Herbowo, 2026). Many of these individuals reside in low-income regions or areas prone to environmental disasters where access to healthcare services, infrastructure, and emergency response systems is limited (Mazza *et al.*, 2026). Climate change can worsen their existing health conditions by increasing exposure to environmental hazards, interrupting medical care,

and disrupting essential support systems such as caregivers and assistive devices (Fachruddin, 2026). Therefore, understanding the relationship between climate change and disability is essential for designing inclusive policies that protect vulnerable populations (Auerbach *et al.*, (2026).

Disability and the Factors That Increase Vulnerability

Disability includes a broad range of conditions that may affect a person's physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychological functioning. Physical disabilities may limit mobility, making it difficult for individuals to move quickly or evacuate during emergencies. Sensory disabilities such as visual or hearing impairments may restrict access to warning messages and emergency information (Auerbach *et al.*, 2026). Intellectual and developmental disabilities may affect a person's ability to understand risks or make rapid decisions during disasters. Similarly, psychosocial disabilities can influence emotional resilience and the ability to cope with stressful environmental events (Bamney *et al.*, 2026). However, vulnerability among people with disabilities is not only caused by their health conditions. Social, economic, and environmental factors often play a much larger role. In many societies, people with disabilities face discrimination, unemployment, poverty, and limited access to education and healthcare services. These challenges increase their exposure to environmental risks and

reduce their ability to recover after disasters. Many individuals also rely on assistive devices, regular medication, or specialized healthcare services, all of which may become unavailable during emergencies. In addition, inaccessible infrastructure and communication barriers may prevent them from receiving early warnings about environmental hazards, further increasing their health risks (Liao, 2026).

Environmental Hazards Associated with Climate Change

Climate change contributes to several environmental hazards that threaten human health and safety (Mutinta, 2026). One of the most visible effects is the increase in global temperatures, which has resulted in more frequent and severe heat waves (Cui *et al.*, 2026). Extreme heat can cause dehydration, heat exhaustion, and cardiovascular stress, particularly among people with chronic illnesses or mobility limitations (Russin *et al.*, 2026). Some medications can also interfere with the body's ability to regulate temperature, making certain individuals even more vulnerable during heat waves (Bukauskaitė Žiūkienė, 2026).

Climate change has also intensified extreme weather events such as floods, storms, and hurricanes. Flooding can contaminate drinking water sources and create favorable conditions for the spread of infectious diseases. These disasters often damage healthcare facilities, roads, and other critical infrastructure, making it difficult for affected populations to access medical assistance (Afzal *et al.*, 2026). In addition, prolonged droughts can lead to food shortages, malnutrition, and water scarcity. Air pollution may also worsen due to climate-induced wildfires and atmospheric changes. Together, these environmental hazards create complex health challenges that disproportionately affect people with disabilities who already face barriers to healthcare and protective resources (Airi & Salgotra 2026).

Health Implications of Climate Change for People with Disabilities

Climate change exposes individuals with disabilities to several direct and indirect health risks. One major concern is heat-related illness during periods of extreme temperature (Tohit *et al.*, 2026). Some individuals with physical or neurological disabilities have difficulty regulating body temperature or accessing cooling systems. In addition, those who depend on electrically powered medical equipment, such as ventilators or powered wheelchairs, may face life-threatening situations during power outages caused by climate-related disasters (Bukhari *et al.*, 2026).

Environmental changes can also increase the spread of infectious diseases. Flooding and stagnant water provide breeding grounds for mosquitoes and other disease-carrying vectors, increasing the risk of diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. People with disabilities may be more vulnerable to infections due to weaker immune systems, poor sanitation conditions, or limited access to healthcare facilities (Muslim & Susami, 2026). Moreover, climate-related disasters often disrupt routine medical services, rehabilitation programs, and access to medications, which can worsen existing health conditions (Hussein, 2026).

Mental health is another important concern. Climate disasters may lead to displacement, loss of support networks, and emotional trauma (Malik, 2026). These experiences can result in anxiety, depression, and psychological distress, especially among individuals who already face social isolation or dependence on caregivers. Addressing both the physical and mental health impacts of climate change is therefore crucial for protecting people with disabilities (Natukunda & Abdul 2026).

Table 1: Key Findings and Recommendations of Included Papers Related to Health Implications of Climate Change for People with Disabilities

#	Author(s) and Year	Article title	Type of climate change events	Type of disability	Key findings and recommendations
1	Alexander <i>et al.</i> , 2019	A bellweather for climate change and disability: educational needs of rehabilitation professionals regarding disaster management and spinal cord injuries	Extreme weather disasters	Physical and sensory related to spinal cord injury	Rehabilitation professionals acknowledge significant negative impacts of climate change-related disasters on persons with SCI. Disability and climate change are human rights issues. Perform comprehensive education of rehabilitation professionals on disaster management and SCI. Conduct research on climate change and SCI.
2	Mann <i>et al.</i> , 2021	Children and Adolescents with Disabilities and Exposure to Disasters, Terrorism, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: a Scoping Review	Disaster, Terrorism and COVID19	Physical (mobility), sensory, intellectual, and psychological	Children with disabilities and their families have increased vulnerability in disasters due to societal discrimination and challenges related to trauma, various medical conditions, mobility, sensory perception, executive functioning, language, intellectual abilities, and adaptive behavior. Conduct research to enhance disaster preparedness, communication in disasters, and trauma-informed treatments of COVID-19 pandemic impacts.
3	Peek & Stough, 2010	Children with disabilities in the context of disaster: A social vulnerability perspective	Natural disasters, hurricanes, floods	Physical and psychological	Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable in disasters. Separation of children from caregivers in disasters can cause trauma. Mental health symptoms resembling PTSD and depression. Lack of accessible post-disaster housing, healthcare, and academic accommodations can impede impacted children's community integration. Establish a robust research framework to investigate vulnerabilities, risks, and resiliency factors of children with disabilities in disaster contexts, integrating disability as a key aspect of short- and long-term impact assessments and intervention strategies.

#	Author(s) and Year	Article title	Type of climate change events	Type of disability	Key findings and recommendations
4	Levy & Patz, 2015	Climate Change, Human Rights, and Social Justice	Heat waves, extreme weather events, air pollution, sea level rise	Not mentioned	Climate change-related extreme weather events disproportionately affect low-income countries and poor people in high-income countries, threatening economic, social, cultural, and civil rights including a standard of living adequate for health and well-being National governments should promote and protect human rights to advance social justice in the face of climate change through disaster adaptation and mitigation measures PWD experience barriers in preparing for disasters, compounding negative impacts of these extreme weather events; Include PWDs more fully in disaster management processes
5	Elisala et al., 2020	Exploring PWDs preparedness, perceptions, and experiences of disasters in Tuvalu	Cyclone, Surged storms, Drought	Physical, sensory (blindness)	
6	Ssenoga et al., 2022	Mapping the susceptibility of persons with disabilities to landslides in a highland landscape of Bushika Sub County, Mount Elgon, Eastern Uganda	Landslides	Physical, sensory (blindness, deafness),	Most PWDs in the study area live in high-risk landslide zones Blind and deaf-blind individuals were perceived as those most affected by landslides Though highly susceptible to landslide hazards, PWDs are lowly prioritized in rescue and recovery efforts Establish inclusive landslide management programs including disaster response training and relocation/resettlement assistance to mitigate vulnerability and enhance disaster resilience of PWDs, especially in high-risk areas
7	Kisira et al., 2023	Persons with disabilities and resilience: coping with environmental hazards case of landslides in Mount Elgon region, Uganda	Landslides	Physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental	PWDs face many challenges in coping with environmental hazards and developed resilience enhancement activities including self-help groups, income-generating activities, livelihood adaptation, and help-seeking from external agencies PWDs should be more included in disaster management processes Solicit additional assistance and support from government authorities including more inclusive disaster services
8	Benigno et al., 2015	Responding to the health and rehabilitation needs of people with disabilities post-Haiyan	Typhoon Haiyan	Pre-existing disabilities and those acute traumatic injuries (primarily affecting musculoskeletal system involving mobility)	Available pre-disaster PWD data would strengthen disaster response efforts Post-disaster rehabilitation services decrease the burden of disease and improve the quality of life of impacted PWDs Include PWDs in initial post-disaster health assessments to effectively meet their specific disability and rehabilitation needs
9	Pan, 2016	Study on mobility-disadvantaged group' risk perception and coping behaviors of abrupt geological hazards in	Typhoons, torrential rain, debris floods, rock avalanches, landslides, mud-rock flows, and strong winds, intense rainfall,	Not mentioned	Mobility-disadvantaged groups have low awareness and knowledge of disaster prevention and mitigation strategies Implement public disaster education initiatives to dispel PWD misconceptions about disasters and to communicate

#	Author(s) and Year	Article title	Type of climate change events	Type of disability	Key findings and recommendations
		coastal rural area of China	earthquake shaking, water level change, storm waves or rapid stream erosion		appropriate coping and resilience strategies Establish mobility-disadvantaged group databases to inform development of appropriate disaster risk management and recovery strategies
10	Khine & Langkulsen, 2023	The Implications of Climate Change on Health among Vulnerable Populations in South Africa: A Systematic Review	Storms, flooding, and droughts	Various functional domains including walking, seeing, hearing, remembering, concentrating, communicating, social interaction, and self-care	Climate change related extreme weather events have a negative impact on vulnerable populations including PWDs Establish a comprehensive national health monitoring and surveillance program to include stronger disaster early warning systems Establish a disaster finance coordination mechanism Generally strengthen health systems and infrastructure
11	Hiranandani, 2015	Where is disability in disaster management in India?	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Mismanagement of previous disasters highlights the importance of institutional learning from them Historically, marginalized populations including PWDs have not actively participated in disaster management processes Include marginalized populations including PWDs more fully in disaster management processes
12	Stough, 2015	World Report on Disability, Intellectual Disabilities, and Disaster Preparedness: Costa Rica as a Case Example	Floods, droughts, earthquakes, storms, and variability in temperature and precipitation patterns	Intellectual	Persons with intellectual disabilities suffer disproportionate risks in disasters and are often excluded from relief services Implement specialized communication strategies to help persons with intellectual disabilities access event information and services
13	Engelman et al., 2022	Global Disability Justice In Climate Disasters: Mobilizing People With Disabilities As Change Agents	Bushfires, floods, heatwaves, storms, and food- and waterborne diseases	Physical	PWDs in resource-poor nations face economic and social marginalization exacerbated by climate change-related disasters; Include PWDs more fully in disaster management policy and processes
14	Ahmed et al., 2020	Effect of extreme weather events on injury, disability, and death in Bangladesh	Drought, flood, waterlogging, cyclone, tornado, storm/tidal surge, thunderstorm, river/coastal erosion, landslides, and hailstorm	Not mentioned	Socio-economic factors including age, education level, asset quintiles, urban residency and physical disabilities contribute significantly to the substantial burden of disaster-related injuries, disabilities, and fatalities in Bangladesh

Difficulties Faced During Climate-Related Disasters

During environmental disasters such as floods, storms, or wildfires, people with disabilities often encounter significant challenges that increase their risk of harm. One major issue is limited mobility, which can make evacuation extremely difficult. Emergency evacuation procedures are often designed without considering the needs of individuals who rely on wheelchairs, crutches, or other mobility aids. Consequently, many people with disabilities may struggle to reach safe locations during emergencies (Fachruddin, 2026). Another challenge involves the accessibility of emergency shelters and disaster response systems (Jiang, 2026). Many shelters lack essential features such as ramps, accessible toilets, and communication assistance for individuals with hearing or visual impairments (Raj et al., 2026). In some cases, emergency warnings are not provided in accessible formats, preventing disabled individuals from receiving timely information. Additionally, many people with disabilities rely on caregivers or family members for daily support, and separation from these caregivers during disasters can further increase health risks. These challenges highlight the importance of developing disaster response strategies that are inclusive and accessible to all members of society (MacPherson-Krutzsky, et al., 2026).

The Role of Socioeconomic and Environmental Inequalities

Socioeconomic inequality greatly influences how climate change affects people with disabilities (MacPherson-Krutzsky et al., 2026). Due to discrimination and limited employment opportunities, many individuals with disabilities live in poverty. Poverty often restricts access to safe housing, quality healthcare, nutritious food, and clean water. As a result, many disabled individuals live in areas that are highly exposed to environmental hazards such as floods, landslides, or extreme heat (Abate et al., 2026).

Environmental inequalities also contribute to poor health outcomes. In many developing countries, people with disabilities live in poorly constructed housing or informal settlements that cannot withstand extreme weather conditions (Mangara & Dorasamy 2026). These communities often lack proper sanitation systems, waste management services, and healthcare infrastructure (Luthviati, 2026). During climate-related disasters, the absence of resources and institutional support can significantly increase health risks and delay recovery efforts. Reducing these inequalities is therefore essential for building climate-resilient communities (Asibey et al., 2026).



Figure 1: Persons Living with Disability (PWDs) were among the estimated one million victims affected by the flood that hit Maiduguri, the Borno State capital and its environs on September 9.

(Source: <https://web.facebook.com/TheICIR/posts/persons-living-with-disability-pwds-were-among-the-estimated-one-million-victims/995014476001654/?rdc=1&rdrc#>)

Evidence from Vulnerable Communities

Real-life examples from vulnerable regions demonstrate how climate change disproportionately affects individuals with disabilities. In communities frequently affected by flooding, people with mobility impairments often face major challenges during evacuation and rescue operations. Many emergency response systems fail to provide accessible transportation or adequate assistance, leaving disabled individuals stranded during disasters (Nur, 2026).

Similarly, in rural regions where healthcare facilities are scarce, climate-related events such as droughts or extreme heat can interrupt essential medical services. Individuals with disabilities who depend on regular treatment, physiotherapy, or medications may experience serious health complications when these services become unavailable. These situations highlight the urgent need for inclusive disaster planning and climate adaptation strategies that specifically consider the needs of people with disabilities (Nur, 2026).

Inclusive Adaptation and Mitigation Strategies

Reducing the health risks associated with climate change requires inclusive strategies that prioritize vulnerable populations. Governments and communities must integrate disability considerations into climate adaptation policies, disaster preparedness programs, and healthcare systems. This includes creating accessible evacuation routes, ensuring that emergency shelters are disability-friendly, and developing communication systems that deliver warnings in accessible formats such as audio alerts, visual signals, and sign language interpretation (Mubashir *et al.*, 2026).

Healthcare systems also need to strengthen their preparedness for climate emergencies. Hospitals and clinics should establish emergency plans that guarantee continuous access to medications, medical equipment, and assistive technologies during disasters. Community support networks can also help ensure that individuals with disabilities receive assistance when needed. At the same time, broader climate mitigation efforts such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions are essential for limiting long-term environmental damage and protecting future generations (Gkouliaveras *et al.*, 2026).

Role of Governments and Supporting Organizations

Governments and international organizations play a critical role in addressing the link between climate change, disability, and public health. Policymakers must ensure that climate action plans and disaster management strategies fully include the rights and needs of people with disabilities. This requires collecting accurate data on disability-related vulnerabilities, improving inclusive infrastructure, and supporting research on the health impacts of climate change (Flores & Flores 2026). Non-governmental organizations, environmental health groups, and disability advocacy organizations also contribute significantly to these efforts. They can raise awareness, provide community education, and implement programs that support vulnerable populations. Training healthcare workers, emergency responders, and community leaders on disability inclusion can improve disaster preparedness and response. Strong collaboration between governments, researchers, and civil society is essential for developing sustainable solutions that protect people with disabilities from climate-related health risks (Khan, 2026).

CONCLUSION

Climate change has become a major global challenge with serious consequences for the environment, public health, and socioeconomic stability. As environmental hazards such as heat waves, floods, droughts, and storms continue to increase in frequency and intensity, vulnerable populations face greater risks. Among these groups, people with disabilities experience disproportionate impacts due to physical limitations, health conditions, and existing social inequalities. Many individuals with disabilities already face barriers such as poverty, limited access to healthcare, inaccessible infrastructure, and social discrimination. When climate-related disasters occur, these challenges are often intensified, making it more difficult for them to evacuate, access medical care, or obtain essential support services.

The health implications of climate change for people with disabilities are both direct and indirect. Extreme temperatures, environmental pollution, and the spread of infectious diseases can worsen existing health conditions, while disruptions to healthcare services, electricity supply,

and caregiver support may create life-threatening situations. In addition, the psychological stress caused by displacement, loss of support networks, and disaster-related trauma can negatively affect mental well-being. These realities demonstrate that climate change is not only an environmental issue but also a social justice and public health concern.

Addressing these challenges requires inclusive and well-coordinated strategies that prioritize the needs of people with disabilities. Governments, healthcare systems, and community organizations must work together to integrate disability considerations into climate policies, disaster preparedness programs, and public health planning. By promoting accessible infrastructure, equitable healthcare access, and inclusive disaster response systems, societies can reduce vulnerability and build more resilient communities in the face of climate change.

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