



Department
of Health



Climate change, health and policy development

An introduction

This resource was funded through a VicHealth Impact Research Grant. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of VicHealth. We also acknowledge the generous contributions of state and local government policymakers who co-designed this resource.

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Acknowledgement

This resource has been co-designed by the University of Melbourne, the Victorian Government and a cohort of state and local government policymakers from Victoria.

We recognise Aboriginal people as the Traditional Owners of the land and water on which we live, work and play.

We pay respect to Elders past and present and acknowledge the care for Country, stewardship and invaluable contributions of Aboriginal people and communities to Victorian life.



Purpose of this overview

This overview has been designed for policymakers developing climate policies who work outside the health sector.

It provides foundational information on climate change, human health and policy development with the aim of supporting ‘healthier’ climate policy development in sectors other than health.

Reducing climate-related health risks and impacts requires action across all policy areas. Our research suggests that there are limited tools and resources to support policymakers across sectors to understand the potential health impacts of different policy options.

This is one of several resources developed to address this gap.





Why this overview is important

In Victoria, there are several pieces of legislation that encourage state and local governments to consider climate and health during the development of relevant policies¹.

Often, policies that affect health outcomes are being made by policymakers beyond the health sector.

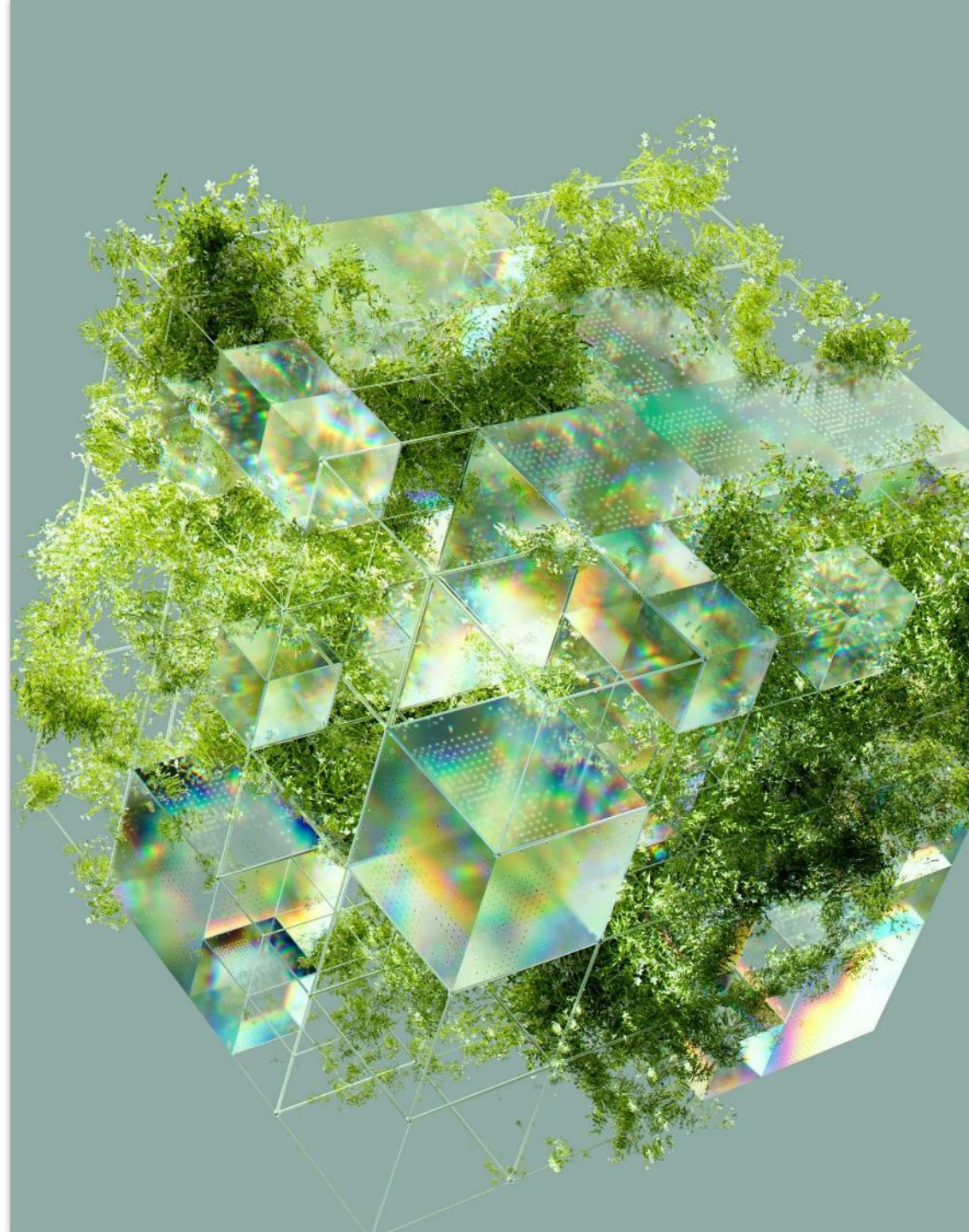
Almost every policy action is likely to impact individual or community health outcomes either directly or indirectly.

A basic understanding of the interactions between climate and health is essential to develop policies that avoid inadvertently harming health and to realise opportunities to improve health and wellbeing.

¹ For example, refer to the [Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/public-health-and-wellbeing-act-2008/068) <<https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/public-health-and-wellbeing-act-2008/068>>, the [Environment Protection Act 2017](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/environment-protection-act-2017/005) <<https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/environment-protection-act-2017/005>> and the [Climate Change Act 2017](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/climate-change-act-2017/005) <<https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/climate-change-act-2017/005>>.

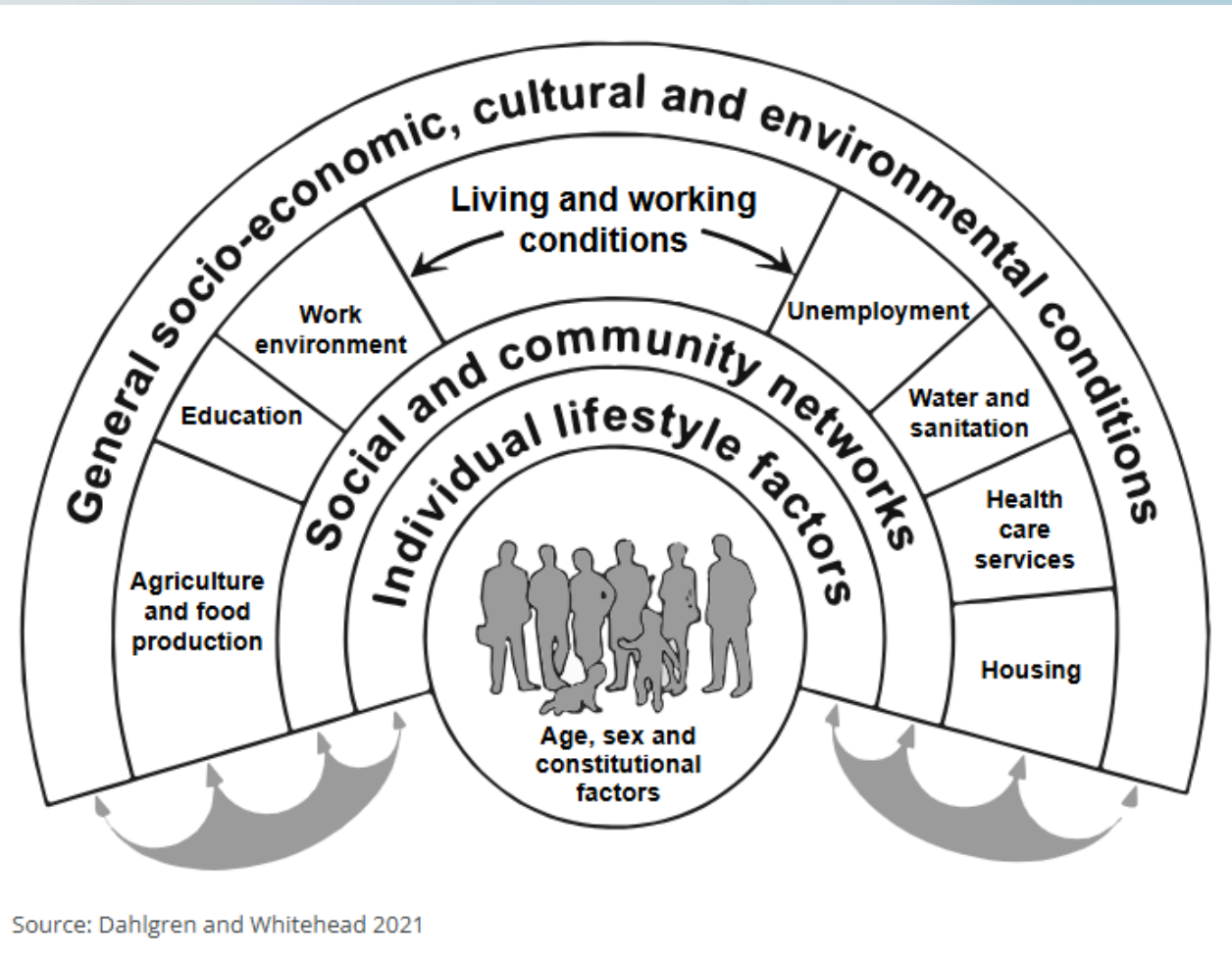
Key definitions

- Health: *A state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease.*
- Hazard: *The potential occurrence of a natural or human-induced physical event or trend that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts.*
- Vulnerability: *The degree to which a system, sector or social group is susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change.*
- Adaptation: *Changes made to natural or human systems to prepare for actual or expected changes in the climate to minimise harm, act on opportunities or cope with the consequences.*
- Mitigation: *Actions taken to reduce or prevent the emission of greenhouse gases and slow the rate of climate change.*
- Health co-benefits: *Implementation of climate policies that lead to improvements in health outcomes.*



Our health is impacted by factors in every setting

Our health is influenced by factors including but not limited to our activity levels, where we live, how we commute, our access to green space, our ability to earn money, and our exposure to climate change.

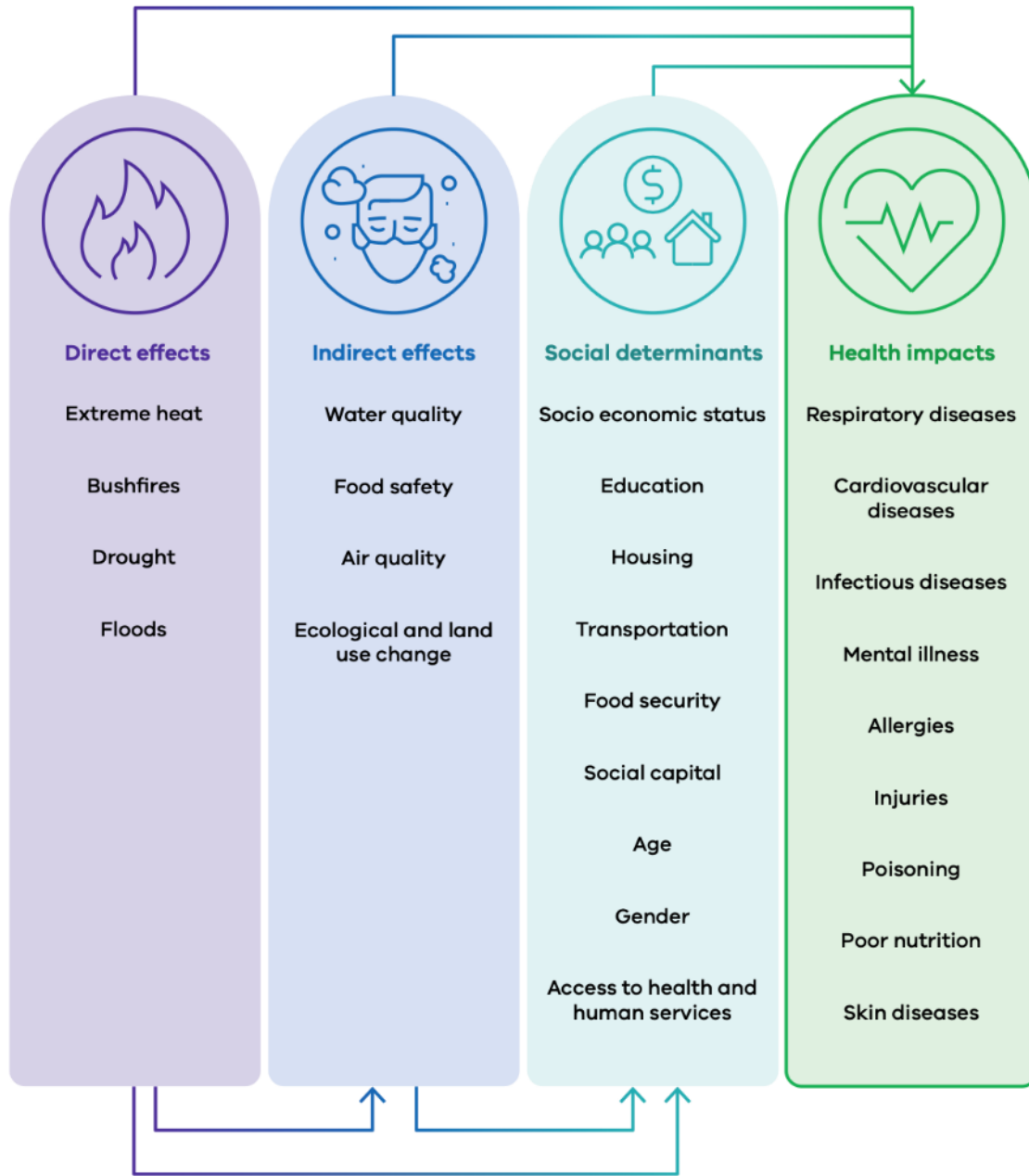


Source: Dahlgren and Whitehead (2021) in Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024), *What are determinants of health?* [website]. Accessed 10 July 2025 from <
<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/what-are-determinants-of-health>>

Climate change affects health

There are multiple, complex pathways in which individual or community health outcomes can be directly or indirectly impacted by climate change.

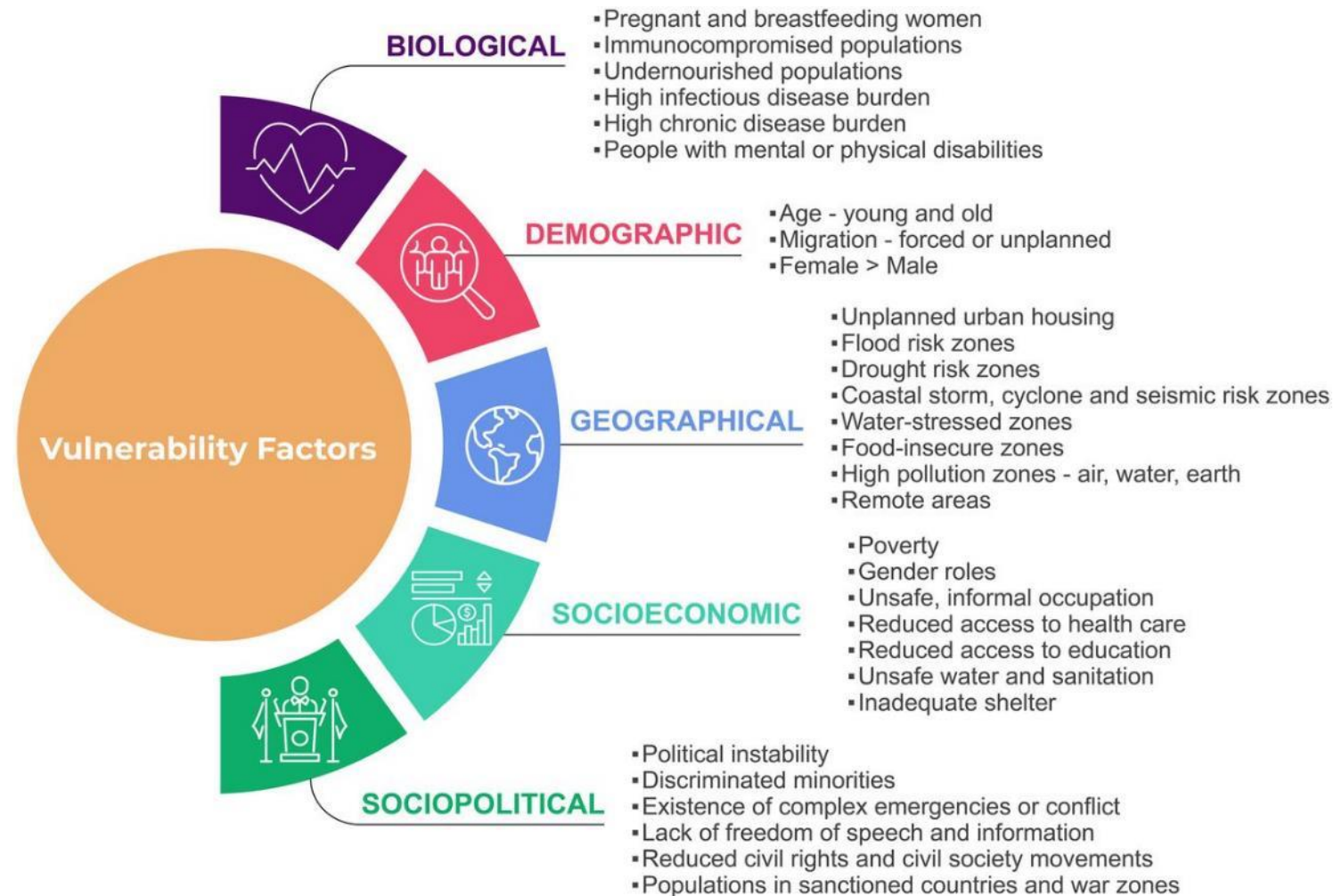
These occur across all life stages and can affect anyone.



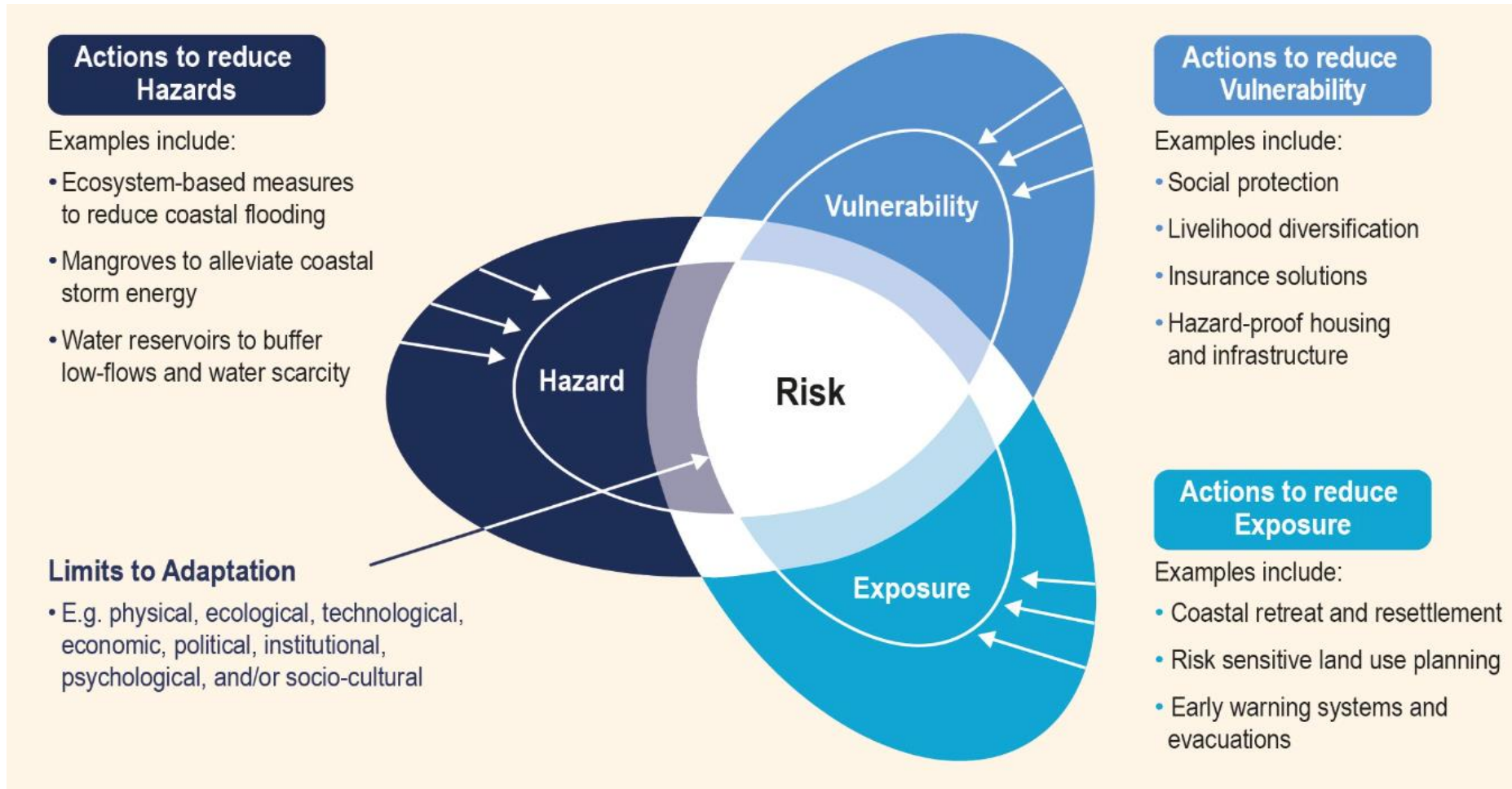
Some groups are more at risk from climate-related health impacts than others

In Victoria, groups considered at greater risk of experiencing climate-related health impacts include:

- Children
- People over 65 years of age
- Pregnant women and unborn babies
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- People with existing medical conditions
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- People experiencing homelessness or insecure housing



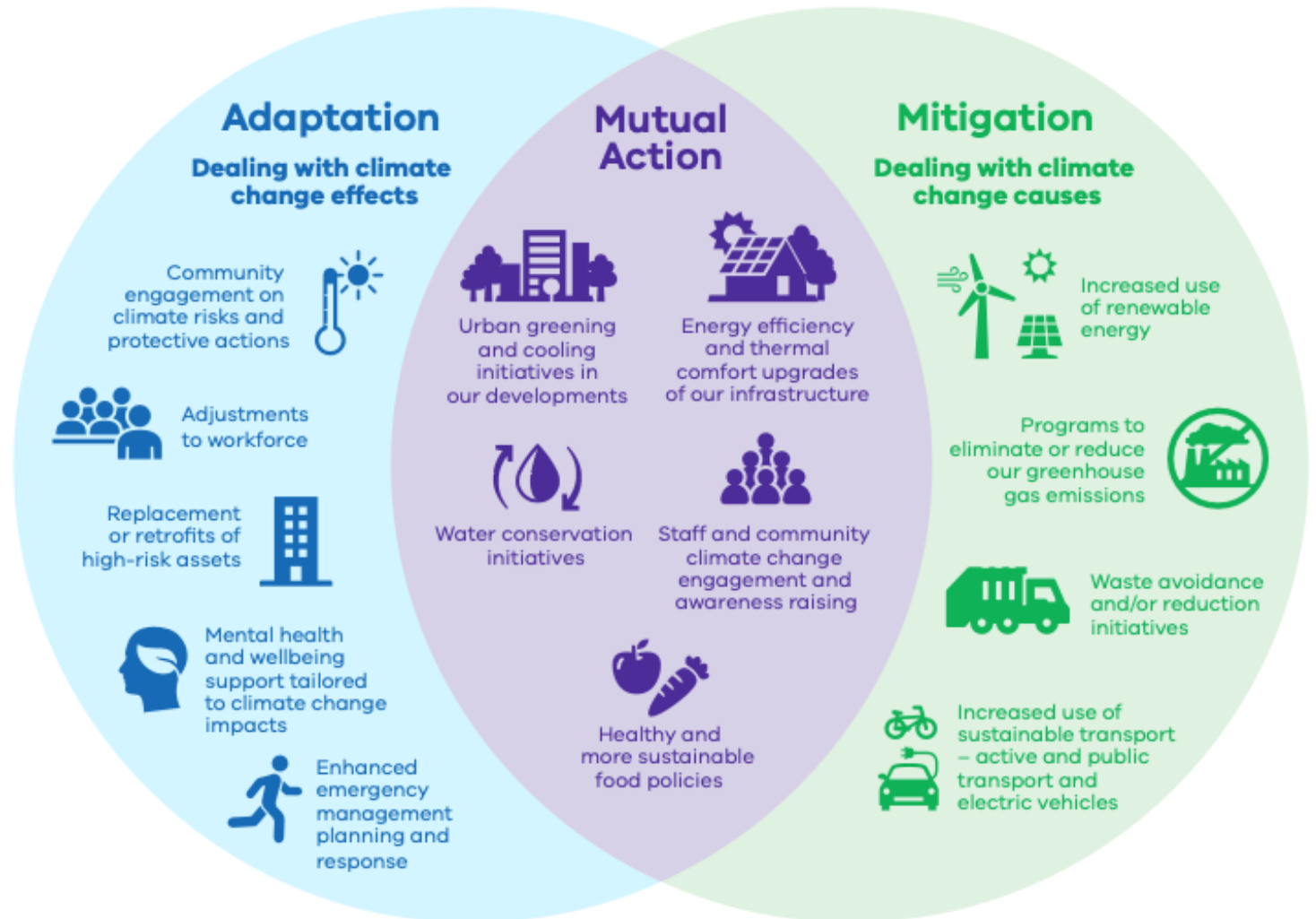
Climate-related health risks are informed by policy actions to reduce vulnerability and exposure to hazards



While numerous factors influence health, actions that policymakers take can affect the likelihood that an individual or a community experiences climate-related health risks.

Protecting health requires adaptation and mitigation actions to be designed together

When climate policies are developed with health and diverse community input, there is a higher likelihood of better health outcomes for all.



Climate interventions can bring health co-benefits

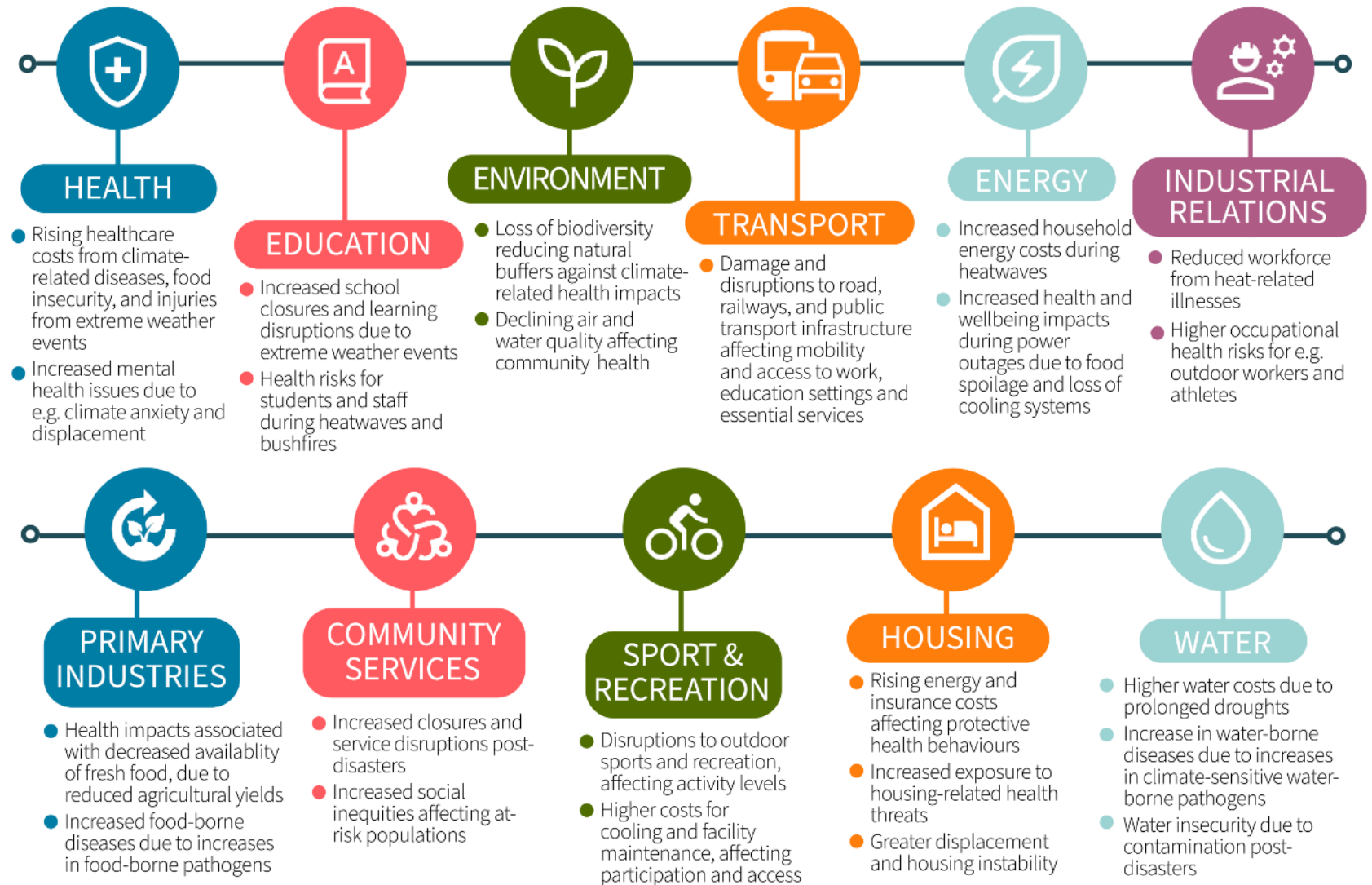
Sector/system	Examples of climate actions	Health co-benefits
Energy	Expand renewable energy use, reduce fossil fuel use	Reduced exacerbations of heart and lung conditions from improved air quality
Built environment	Incentivise passive design, and energy efficiency standards, increase use of 'cool' and less heat-absorbing materials (e.g. 'cool roofs')	Reduction in heat-related injury and death, improvement in mental health from thermal comfort
	Provide refuge from extreme heat and heatwaves, including through increasing urban greening	Reduction in heat- and other related injuries and deaths during extreme events
	Introduce risk zoning policies and relocate or repurpose at-risk structures	Reduction in injuries and deaths related to extreme events (e.g. bushfires and flooding events)
	Protect and improve the natural environment, including the ecosystem services it provides	Reduction in heat-related injury and death, improvement in physical and mental health from increased activity
Food systems	Increase availability and uptake of healthy fresh, local affordable and plant-rich foods, and limit discretionary and ultra-processed food and drinks	Reduction in obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and some cancers, and reduced food insecurity
Emergency management	Enhance communication of climate risks and threats	Reduction in injuries, illnesses and deaths from extreme events
Transport	Increase equitable, affordable, accessible and safe public transport options	Reduced exacerbations of heart and lung conditions through improved air quality and increased physical activity
	Decrease use of private motor vehicles, incentivise low-emission vehicle use	
	Increase safe options for walking and cycling (active transport)	
Water	Protect and improve drinking water, sewage and stormwater infrastructure	Reduction in water-borne diseases and water-related injuries and deaths

While the health co-benefits of climate interventions are difficult to quantify, health outcomes are improved by climate action across sectors.

Table key:
Adaptation actions
Mitigation actions
Dual actions

Climate inaction leads to costs

In the absence of ambitious climate policies, costs are borne by us all, although people most at-risk and future generations will be most greatly impacted.



Developing healthier climate policies

The information contained in this resource is based on available evidence and can be used to support the consideration of health outcomes during policy development.

It can help in the design of policy measures by informing data collection and monitoring and evaluation activities to determine the health impacts of policy choices.

Policymakers are encouraged to incorporate relevant elements from this resource into decision-making processes.



Further information and resources

You can find out more about climate change, health and policy development through the resources below:

- Victorian Government (2022). *Health and Human Services Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan 2022-2026* <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/climate-change-and-sustainability-in-the-health-sector>>.
- Victorian Department of Health (2024). *Tackling climate change and its impacts on health through municipal public health and wellbeing planning: Guidance for local government 2024* <<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/tackling-climate-change-impacts-health-municipal-public-health-wellbeing-planning>>.
- Victorian Climate Resilient Councils (2024). *Victorian Climate Resilient Councils* <<https://www.vcrc.org.au/>>.
- Cissé, G., et al. (2022). *Health, Wellbeing, and the Changing Structure of Communities* <<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/chapter/chapter-7/>>.
- IPCC (2022). *IPCC Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate* <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/ocean-and-cryosphere-in-a-changing-climate/A05E6C9F8638FA7CE1748DE2EB7B491B>>.

<https://www.health.vic.gov.au/environmental-health/climate-change-and-health>

<https://www.unimelb.edu.au/climate/collaboration/climate-catch-lab>

<https://waga.com.au/>