

Ecoliteracy Survey Results

In 2019, an ecoliteracy survey was conducted by the Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment in collaboration with the Canadian Nurses Association. The purpose of the survey was to identify nurses' awareness, level of education, and use of teaching resources with patients/clients regarding environmental health, as well as their perception of the impact of the health-care system on the ecosystem. It was found that although a vast majority (90%) of nurses believe they have a responsibility to protect and preserve ecosystems, only one-third (32%) have participated in environmental action in their work. With increased ecoliteracy, nurses will be better able to partake in environmental action within their workplaces. *The key results of the survey are as follows:*

KEY RESULTS

- Food security/quality (57%) and air quality (indoor and outdoor; 55% and 54%) were the environmental exposures most frequently discussed with patients.
- The largest proportion (44%) of respondents were “somewhat comfortable” discussing environmental exposures with their patients. *Programs to increase ecoliteracy could begin with nurses who are somewhat comfortable with the subject, providing them with an opportunity to improve their knowledge and become ecoliteracy champions among their peers.*
- Of the 17 resources listed to assist health-care providers integrate environmental health issues into practice, only three were used by more than 1/3 of respondents: Canada’s Food Guide (66%), Health Canada: Air Quality Index (45%) and Health Canada: Extreme Heat (39%). The remaining resources ranged in use by respondents between 2-17%. *Thus, there is room to promote usage of existing resources.*
- 77% of respondents believe that ecoliteracy should be a basic competency of an entry-to-practice registered nurse, and almost 9 in 10 respondents said that they would be interested in online educational resources about climate change and environmental health for nurses in Canada. *Nurses want to increase their ecoliteracy.*
- In the workplace, challenges for nurses to address issues of environmental health include feeling that environmental



issues are not a priority for colleagues and that climate change is too controversial a topic to discuss with patients and coworkers. Nurses noted that patients and colleagues may believe that climate change is a myth, and that patients may work within the oil, gas or transportation industry, making discussion of environmental issues difficult to navigate. Additionally, priorities are on safe and affordable health care, meaning that there is a lack of time, funding and resources for addressing environmental issues.

- Nurses reported concern for people perceived as being of low socioeconomic standing who lack adequate resources to mitigate the effects of climate change. Nurses noted that inequities are increased with environmental change.
- Nurses reported low participation of employers and workplaces in environmental health initiatives. For example, only 13% of respondents stated that their employer had an environmentally preferable purchasing policy. In terms of whether nurses face challenges in addressing issues of environmental health in the workplace, the majority (57%) of respondents were unsure, while 31% did, and only 12% did not.
- *Nurses should be supported to integrate environmental principles throughout their clinical practice from their interactions with patients, all the way through to advocating for uptake of greener initiatives in their facilities.*

LIMITATIONS:

The sample size of this survey, at 233 respondents, was relatively small. 100% of respondents answered in English (the survey was also made available in French). There were a disproportionately low number of respondents from Quebec (2%). There was a greater proportion ($n=18$) of respondents who identified as teachers of nursing students than within the general nurse population. This was a highly educated sample, as most (45%) nurse respondents had completed an undergraduate degree, and more (28%) had completed a master's degree than a diploma (21%); 6% had completed a PhD. The greatest proportion (28%) of participants were 50-59 years old and the smallest proportion (13%) was in the 20-29 age range. This survey is not a random sample of nurses and represents only a small proportion of the regulated nursing population, and these limitations must be considered during interpretation of the results. Based

on survey data, the number of respondents may be limited due to nurses managing competing priorities and, as such, having to choose issues that are, or are perceived to be, of greater urgency and acuity. Survey responses further indicated that some nurses may believe climate change is a myth or they lack an understanding of these issues and are thus less likely to participate in the survey. Literature suggests that the nursing profession is not well prepared to address the health impacts of climate change due to a lack of knowledge and appropriate education and training.¹ If nurses did not feel knowledgeable about this topic, they may have not participated in this survey. Nursing professionals may have felt that this topic was not relevant to their practice setting and therefore deemed it a concern to those in public health/community health settings. This would correlate with the fact that most (25%) of respondents identified as being in community/public health, a far higher percentage than that found in the general nursing population.



1 Leffers, J., & Butterfield, P. (2018). Nurses play essential roles in reducing health problems due to climate change. *Nursing Outlook*, 66(2), 210–213. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2018.02.008>