



Air Quality and Health Outcomes (AQHO) in Ontario

Outreach & Communication of AQHI

File No. AQHO-16/17-017

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Final Report

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Table of Contents

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
2. PROJECT MILESTONES	9
3. STAFF POSITIONS	11
4. DISTRIBUTION OF AIR POLLUTION IN ONTARIO	12
4.1 ANNUAL MEAN DISTRIBUTIONS OF AIR POLLUTION BY PUBLIC HEALTH UNIT IN ONTARIO, 2014	13
4.1.1 Annual mean AQHI by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014	13
4.1.2 Annual mean NO ₂ by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014.....	14
4.1.3 Annual mean PM _{2.5} by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014.....	15
4.1.4 Annual mean O ₃ by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014	16
4.2 ANNUAL MEAN DISTRIBUTIONS OF AIR POLLUTION BY SEASON, 2014	17
4.2.1 Annual mean AQHI by season and by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014.....	17
4.2.2 Annual mean NO ₂ by season and by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014	18
4.2.3 Annual mean PM _{2.5} by season and by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014.....	19
4.2.4 Annual mean O ₃ by season and by Public Health Unit in Ontario, 2014.....	20
5. HEALTH OUTCOMES	21
5.1 ASTHMA.....	21
5.1.1 Age-standardized incidence rates of asthma per 1000 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	21
5.1.2 Age-standardized prevalence rates of asthma per 100 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014	22
5.1.3 Asthma hospitalization rates per 1000 individuals with asthma by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	23
5.1.4 Asthma emergency department visit rates per 1000 individuals with asthma by Public Health Unit, 2014	24
5.1.5 Asthma physician office visits per individual with asthma by Public Health Unit, 2014	25
5.2 CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE (COPD)	26
5.2.1 Age-standardized incidence rates of COPD per 1000 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014	26
5.2.2 Age-standardized prevalence rates of COPD per 100 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	27
5.2.3 COPD hospitalization rates per 100 individuals with COPD by Public Health Unit, 2014	28
5.2.4 COPD emergency department visit rates per 100 individuals with COPD by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	29
5.2.5 COPD physician office visits per individual with COPD by Public Health Unit, 2014	30
5.3 DIABETES.....	31
5.3.1 Age-standardized incidence rates of diabetes per 1000 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	31
5.3.2 Age-standardized prevalence rates of diabetes per 100 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	32
5.3.3 Diabetes hospitalization rates per 100 individuals with diabetes by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	33
5.3.4 Diabetes emergency department visit rates per 1000 individuals with diabetes by Public Health Unit, 2014	34
5.3.5 Diabetes physician office visits per individual with diabetes by Public Health Unit, 2014	35
5.4 HYPERTENSION.....	36
5.4.1 Age-standardized incidence rates of hypertension per 1000 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 201.....	36
5.4.2 Age-standardized prevalence rates of hypertension per 100 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014	37
5.4.3 Hypertension hospitalization rates per 1000 individuals with hypertension by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	38
5.4.4 Hypertension emergency department visit rates per 1000 individuals with hypertension by Public Health Unit, 2014	39
5.4.5 Hypertension physician office visits per individual with hypertension by Public Health Unit, 2014.....	40

5.5 CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE (CHF)	41
5.5.1 Age-standardized incidence rates of CHF per 1000 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014	41
5.5.2 Age-standardized prevalence rates of CHF per 100 Ontario population by Public Health Unit, 2014	42
5.5.3 CHF hospitalization rates per 100 individuals with CHF by Public Health Unit, 2014	43
5.5.4 CHF emergency department visit rates per 100 individuals with CHF by Public Health Unit, 2014	44
5.5.5 CHF physician office visits per individual with CHF by Public Health Unit, 2014	45
6. DISTRIBUTION OF AQHI AND CHRONIC DISEASE OUTCOMES	46
6.1 ASTHMA	46
6.1.1 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized incidence rates of asthma in Ontario, 2014	46
6.1.2 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized prevalence rates of asthma in Ontario, 2014	47
6.1.3 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and asthma hospitalization rates in Ontario, 2014	48
6.1.4 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and asthma emergency department visit rates in Ontario, 2014	49
6.1.5 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and asthma physician office visit rates in Ontario, 2014	50
6.2 CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE (COPD)	51
6.2.1 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized incidence rates of COPD in Ontario, 2014	51
6.2.2 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized prevalence rates of COPD in Ontario, 2014	52
6.2.3 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and COPD hospitalization rates in Ontario, 2014	53
6.2.4 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and COPD emergency department visit rates in Ontario, 2014	54
6.2.5 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and COPD physician office visit rates in Ontario, 2014	55
6.3 DIABETES	56
6.3.1 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized incidence rates of diabetes in Ontario, 2014	56
6.3.2 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized prevalence rates of diabetes in Ontario, 2014	57
6.3.3 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and diabetes hospitalization rates in Ontario, 2014	58
6.3.4 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and diabetes emergency department visit rates in Ontario, 2014	59
6.3.5 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and diabetes physician office visit rates in Ontario, 2014	60
6.4 HYPERTENSION	61
6.4.1 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized incidence rates of hypertension in Ontario, 2014	61
6.4.2 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized prevalence rates of hypertension in Ontario, 2014	62
6.4.3 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and hypertension hospitalization rates in Ontario, 2014	63
6.4.4 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and hypertension emergency department visit rates in Ontario, 2014	64
6.4.5 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and hypertension physician office visit rates in Ontario, 2014	65
6.5 CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE (CHF)	66
6.5.1 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized incidence rates of CHF in Ontario, 2014	66
6.5.2 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and age-standardized prevalence rates of CHF in Ontario, 2014	67
6.5.3 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and CHF hospitalization rates in Ontario, 2014	68
6.5.4 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and CHF emergency department visit rates in Ontario, 2014	69
6.5.5 Distribution of mean annual AQHI and CHF physician office visit rates in Ontario, 2014	70
7. TRENDS AND FORECASTING BY REGIONS	71
7.1 ASTHMA	71
7.1.1 Age-standardized incidence rates of asthma 2003-2025, by regions	71
7.1.2 Age-standardized prevalence rates of asthma 2003-2025, by regions	74
7.1.4 Asthma emergency department visit rates 2003-2025, by regions	80
7.1.5 Asthma physician office visit rates 2003-2025, by regions	83
7.2 CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE (COPD)	86
7.2.1 Age-standardized incidence rates of COPD 2003-2025, by regions	86
7.2.2 Age-standardized prevalence rates of COPD 2003-2025, by regions	89

7.2.3	<i>COPD hospitalization rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	92
7.2.4	<i>COPD emergency department visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	95
7.2.5	<i>COPD physician office visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	98
7.3	DIABETES	101
7.3.1	<i>Age-standardized incidence rates of diabetes 2003-2025, by regions</i>	101
7.3.2	<i>Age-standardized prevalence rates of diabetes 2003-2025, by regions</i>	104
7.3.3	<i>Diabetes hospitalization rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	107
7.3.4	<i>Diabetes emergency department visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	110
7.3.5	<i>Diabetes physician office visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	113
7.4	HYPERTENSION	116
7.4.1	<i>Age-standardized incidence rates of hypertension 2003-2025, by regions</i>	116
7.4.2	<i>Age-standardized prevalence rates of hypertension 2003-2025, by regions</i>	119
7.4.3	<i>Hypertension hospitalization rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	122
7.4.4	<i>Hypertension emergency department visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	125
7.4.5	<i>Hypertension physician office visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	128
7.5	CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE (CHF)	131
7.5.1	<i>Age-standardized incidence rates of CHF 2003-2025, by regions</i>	131
7.5.2	<i>Age-standardized prevalence rates of CHF 2003-2025, by regions</i>	134
7.5.3	<i>CHF hospitalization rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	137
7.5.4	<i>CHF emergency department visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	140
7.5.5	<i>CHF physician office visit rates 2003-2025, by regions</i>	143
8.	HEALTH OUTCOME DATA TABLES BY REGION AND YEAR	146
8.1	ASTHMA	146
8.1.1	<i>Incidence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	146
8.1.2	<i>Prevalence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	146
8.1.3	<i>Hospitalization rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	147
8.1.4	<i>Emergency department visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	147
8.1.5	<i>Physician office visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	147
8.2	CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE (COPD)	148
8.2.1	<i>Incidence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	148
8.2.2	<i>Prevalence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	148
8.2.3	<i>Hospitalization rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	149
8.2.4	<i>Emergency department visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	149
8.2.5	<i>Physician office visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	149
8.3	DIABETES	150
8.3.1	<i>Incidence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	150
8.3.2	<i>Prevalence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	150
8.3.3	<i>Hospitalization rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	151
8.3.4	<i>Emergency department visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	151
8.3.5	<i>Physician office visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	151
8.4	HYPERTENSION	152
8.4.1	<i>Incidence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	152
8.4.2	<i>Prevalence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	152
8.4.3	<i>Hospitalization rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	153
8.4.4	<i>Emergency department visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	153
8.4.5	<i>Physician office visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region</i>	153

8.5 CONGESTIVE HEART FAILURE (CHF)154

8.5.1 Incidence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region..... 154

8.5.2 Prevalence rates, 2003 – 2016 by region 154

8.5.3 Hospitalization rates, 2003 – 2016 by region..... 155

8.5.4 Emergency department visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region..... 155

8.5.5 Physician office visit rates, 2003 – 2016 by region 155

9. REFERENCES156

10. GLOSSARY156

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Health Canada proposed the national AQHI formulation in 2006 to measure the impact of air pollutants on human health, an index that derives a value based on the cumulative effect of three pollutants (i.e., O₃, PM_{2.5} and NO₂). The AQHI is designed to help people understand what the air quality means to their health and how they can make decisions or alter their behaviour to protect their health. Ontario developed the AQHI Plus, a modified version of the national AQHI, in coordination with the federal government. The AQHI Plus takes into account cumulative health effects and Ontario's ambient air quality criteria, and provides consistent air quality messaging to the public.

Ontario's AQHI Plus public reporting was launched on June 24, 2015. Hourly AQHI readings are reported to the public in near real-time on the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MOECP)'s website www.airqualityontario.com and other websites (e.g., Environment and Climate Change Canada's website). Air quality information is disseminated on a timely basis to the public (especially the high-risk population) for self-calibration and taking precautionary measures to mitigate risks associated with air pollution.

A previous study showed that air pollution (measured using the AQHI) can exacerbate respiratory conditions like asthma,¹ emphysema and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and may also contribute to a long-term prevalence risk of other chronic disease such as diabetes, hypertension and stroke.^{2,3} It is important to increase public awareness of the health impact of air pollution and the availability of the AQHI information so that the public (especially the high-risk population) can make good use of such valuable information for self-calibration and taking precautionary measures to mitigate risks associated with air pollution.

Methods

In this Project entitled "AQHO (Air Quality and Health Outcomes) in Ontario", air quality and health outcomes surveillance were integrated. Anonymized and aggregated results including summary tables, graphs and maps were generated and posted on the OASIS website and accessible by the public (<http://lab.research.sickkids.ca/oasis/data-tables/>). The following were conducted:

- Annual statistics and summary tables of AQHI values and individual pollutants (i.e., O₃, PM_{2.5} and NO₂) for Ontario from 2003 to 2014 were generated.
- Maps of AQHI and each of the 3 major pollutants (O₃, PM_{2.5} and NO₂) were generated. The most recent available data (2014) were mapped by cut-points (based on standard deviations from the mean) across public health units (PHU) in Ontario.
- The maps show the mean distribution of air quality and pollutants in Ontario by PHU for seasonal and annual time frames. These maps were generated on ArcGIS Pro using a two-step process. Firstly, the Empirical Bayesian Kriging (EBK) Regression Prediction tool was used to generate a spatial prediction surface of air pollution distribution across Ontario while taking elevation into

account. This spatial prediction surface helped determine air pollution levels in areas where there was no available data due to the absence of air monitoring stations. Secondly, the Zonal Statistics tool was used to calculate the mean statistics of the air pollution prediction surface within each PHU zone (i.e. boundary) of Ontario.

- To confidently predict the mean distribution of air pollution in Ontario using EBK Regression Prediction, fixed-distance buffer zones of 100km were sampled around the air monitoring stations within the provincial boundary. We do not have sufficient data to confidently predict the mean distribution of air pollution outside the buffer zones, such as in Northern Ontario because there are no air monitoring stations in the region. Those areas were marked in grey in the maps in this report.
- Maps of health outcomes by each of the primary surveillance outcome measures (i.e. incidence, prevalence, health services use (hospital admissions, emergency department (ED) visits and physician visits) and by major respiratory chronic diseases and conditions (asthma, chronic COPD, diabetes, hypertension and congestive heart failure (CHF)) were generated.
- Joint maps of AQHI and health outcomes were produced.
- Trend of AQHI and health outcomes were plotted from 2003 to 2014 (most recent data available). A logarithm trend is further fitted to generate modelled values for 2015 through to 2025. Each of the trend and forecasting was conducted for Ontario as a whole and by PHU regions.

Key Results

Air Pollution Maps in Ontario

- The annual mean distributions of air pollution measures varied across Ontario. Overall, average values of AQHI, NO₂, and PM_{2.5} were highest in the Southwest and Northeast regions of the province (Figures 4.1.1-4.1.3), whereas average values of O₃ were highest along the Western provincial border (4.1.4).
- Some variations in annual mean distributions of air pollution measures were observed across seasons. For example, average seasonal highs of AQHI ranged from ≤ 2.88 in the fall to ≤ 3.16 in the spring (Figure 4.2.1). For examples on other pollutants, see Figures 4.2.2-4.2.4.

Health Outcomes

- The highest incidence and prevalence rates for asthma (incidence: 5 per 1000, prevalence: 19 per 100), diabetes (incidence: 9 per 1000, prevalence: 13 per 1000) and hypertension (incidence: 14 per 1000, prevalence: 32 per 1000) were in the PHUs located in Southern Ontario. Incidence and prevalence rates also remained relatively high across the middle of the province, where the highest rates for COPD (incidence: 9 per 1000, prevalence: 7 per 100) and CHF (incidence: 8 per 1000, prevalence: 5 per 100) were observed.
- For all health conditions, hospitalization and ED visit rates were high in Northern Ontario, whereas rates for outpatient physician office visits were generally highest across Southern PHUs.

Distribution of AQHI and Chronic Disease Outcomes

- In general, there appears to be a correlation between air pollution and chronic disease outcomes, whereby prevalence, incidence and health service use rates were higher in areas that had higher mean annual AQHI values.
- There were some exceptions to the pattern of observed correlations between air pollution and health outcomes. Across several chronic diseases, hospitalization and ED visit rates remained relatively high in areas with low AQHI values. For example, asthma hospitalization rates were high in the Northwestern and Timiskaming Health Units (Figure 6.1.3).

Trends and Forecasting By Regions

- Overall, there were minor variations between Public Health Regions.
- From 2003 to 2016, incidence rates for asthma (-59.9%) and hypertension (-39.3%) have been on the decline in Ontario and will continue to decrease, whereas the incidence of COPD, diabetes and CHF has remained relatively unchanged. Prevalence rates for all health conditions will continue to increase.
- Hospitalization and outpatient physician office visit rates for all health conditions have been decreasing across the province. Although ED visit rates for asthma (-61.4%) and diabetes (-18.8%) have decreased, they are increasing for COPD (+47.6%), hypertension (+43.0%) and CHF (+12.1%), most notably in the Northern Region of Ontario.
- There is a correlation between the trends in health conditions and trend in annual mean AQHI values, whereby both have been gradually decreasing and are projected to continue decreasing through 2025. However, causal associations between AQHI and health outcomes cannot be inferred from these crude projections.

Strengths & Limitations

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive report examining the possible relationship between air pollution and health outcomes in Ontario. This report leveraged the use of population-based data, including air pollution data obtained from the MOECP and administrative data housed at ICES for five major chronic conditions. However, this report is based on cross-sectional rather than longitudinal data. We have estimated the correlations between measures of air pollution and health outcomes using a crude methodology, from which no inferences regarding causal associations should or can be made. There may be additional variables that contribute to the observed correlations, and more sophisticated analyses would be required to account for this unmeasured confounding.

Acknowledgement

Data were provided by ICES and funding support from the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. Anonymized and aggregated results including graphs and maps were generated and posted on the OASIS website and accessible by the public. Public image is obtained from Environment Canada.