Environmental public health tracking is the ongoing collection, integration, analysis, interpretation, and distribution of data about environmental hazards, exposures, and their possible health effects. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network unites these types of data from federal, state, and local partners into one dynamic resource.

With funding from CDC, health departments in 23 states and one city are at the forefront of developing the Tracking Network. These health departments feed local data into the Tracking Network, allowing users to generate information on environmental public health hazards in a way never done before.

The Tracking Network gives users the ability to compare state and local data, discover emerging trends, measure progress, and better direct effective and cost-saving public health interventions. It is also strengthening the capacity of public health professionals to successfully address preventable health problems.

In addition, the Tracking Network offers a new way for community members to take a larger role in protecting their own health, offering personal risk information and prevention tips in easily accessible and friendly formats.
Before CDC launched its Tracking Network, no such system existed in the United States. This gap meant that public health professionals were lacking key data and information on environmental health hazards and missing opportunities for prevention. That all changed in 2002, when Congress approved funds for CDC to begin building the country’s first comprehensive environmental public health tracking network.

Today, the network is empowering entire communities to take charge of their own health. Here are their stories.

**CALIFORNIA**

**Tracking Strengthens Community Partnerships & Protects Community Health**

Tracking Networks empower communities to take control of their health and advocate for policies that prevent disease. Such is the case in Imperial County, California.

Imperial County is home to one of the state’s most vital farming regions as well as a high and disproportionate burden of environmental health hazards. One such hazard is perchlorate, a chemical used in rocket fuel. Perchlorate-contaminated water and soil is an ongoing concern for communities such as Imperial County, which is located downstream from a former perchlorate factory. In high doses, perchlorate can impair thyroid function and lead to developmental problems in children and fetuses.

Initiated by public health workers with the California Environmental Health Tracking Program, a study was designed and carried out to gain a clearer picture of the community’s perchlorate exposure.

Critical to the effort was partnering with the environmental justice organization Comité Cívico del Valle and its community health workers, who are known as promotoras de salud. As trusted figures in the community, the promotoras recruited community participants and gathered urine and water samples as well as locally grown produce.

Results showed that the average estimated perchlorate dose among project participants was 70 percent higher than the national average. All participants were mailed their personal results, invited to a meeting with project staff and other participants to ask questions about and discuss project results, and offered the opportunity to visit with a local physician to talk about the results and undergo follow-up testing free of charge.

“This effort has empowered our community and helped identify gaps in policy.” said Luis Olmedo, executive director of Comité Cívico del Valle. “It’s work that is driven by the interests of the community. It just feels like it belongs to us… it’s just that much more powerful.”
IN EAST HARLEM, childhood asthma prevalence is more than twice as high as in the adjacent Upper East Side neighborhood, and asthma-related hospital stays are four times higher for East Harlem kids than for those living in New York City’s highest-income neighborhoods.

For community health worker Teodora Evtimova, network coordinator at the East Harlem Asthma Center for Excellence, addressing such disparities means having the latest data. That’s where the New York City Environmental Public Health Tracking Network comes in.

“It’s amazing because it’s available for everyone to use. It’s the closest to real-time data that I’ve seen.”

For example, Evtimova and her fellow health workers can use the local Tracking Network to generate neighborhood-level maps of childhood asthma-related hospitalizations and of households reporting mice or rats, which are known asthma triggers. These data allow workers on the front lines of asthma control to target interventions where they’ll have the greatest impact.

East Harlem isn’t the only example of how New York City’s Tracking Network is contributing to positive health outcomes. Because tracking data show a rise in childhood asthma-related hospital stays in the fall, city health department staff send messages via the city’s Health Alert Network to 30,000 physicians and other health providers, encouraging them to update kids’ asthma control plans before school starts.

The asthma data gathered via the city’s Tracking Network help the department target its limited resources and prevention efforts where they will have the greatest results.
The Life Cycle of the National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program

From Congressional funds to better health and prevention in our communities

CONGRESSIONAL FUNDING:
- Authorizes CDC to establish a nationwide Tracking Network to close environmental public health data gaps and prevent diseases related to environmental hazards and exposures

CDC TRACKING NETWORK:
- Funds state and local health departments to create tracking networks based on local needs
- Expands state and local environmental public health capacity
- Provides guidance and technical support to states and localities
- Integrates data into a nationwide tracking network
- Engages national health organizations to promote the Tracking Network among health professionals
- Funds universities to conduct projects that link health and environment data and develop tools to assist health departments in their work

STATE AND LOCAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS:
- Create tracking networks to address local needs and community concerns
- Integrate knowledge across public health and environmental fields to explore connections between environmental hazards and health as well as pinpoint populations most at risk for harmful exposures
- Use tracking data to inform and hone public health interventions and inform policy
- Strengthen partnerships with fellow government agencies and community organizations
- Provide important health risk information to the public and raise awareness of the environment’s role in good health

COMMUNITIES:
- Take action to prevent disease and promote positive health using Tracking Network data and health department interventions
- Participate actively in health investigations to protect themselves

An Investment in Prevention

CDC’s Tracking Network supports an ongoing cycle of collection, assessment, intervention, and evaluation that has the potential to lift the health of entire communities and save significant health care dollars. It is a critical means of finding and connecting diverse pieces of a puzzle—a puzzle that, when fully assembled, can present an entirely different view of a community’s health than the individual pieces themselves.

The National Environmental Public Health Tracking Network and its expansion to all states represent a vital investment in disease prevention and acknowledge the significant role our environments play in the health and well-being of America’s communities.

To learn more, visit www.cdc.gov/epitracking.