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Air Pollution as an Environmental Risk Factor for Respiratory Diseases-Pathophysiological Mechanisms and Clinical Implications

Katarzyna Gajowniczek[1*]; Bianka Błaszkiewicz[2]; Jakub Paprocki[3]; Magdalena Cyzio[4]; Maria Nowakowska[5]; Nicola Chrzanowska[6]; Oliwia Gabriela Szustek[7]; Patrycja Łazicka[8]

[1]Uczelnia Medyczna im. Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL
[2]Uczelnia Medyczna im. Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL
[3]Uczelnia Medyczna im. Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL
[4]Uczelnia Medyczna im. Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL
[5]Uczelnia Medyczna im. Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL
[6]Uczelnia Medyczna im. Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL
[7]Uczelnia Medyczna im. Marii Skłodowskiej-Curie w Warszawie: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL
[8]Medical University of Warsaw: Warsaw, Mazovia, PL

[1][https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9576-2547]; [2][https://orcid.org/0009-0001-8743-8106]; [3][https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2386-9206]; [4][https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3024-2517]; [5][https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0125-8579]; [6][https://orcid.org/0009-0007-3789-975X]; [7][https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3542-0360]; [8][https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9018-8155]

Corresponding Author: Katarzyna Gajowniczek[1*]

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Abstract:

- ***Background:***

Air pollution has emerged as the most significant environmental threat to global public health, significantly contributing to the burden of non-communicable respiratory diseases. Nearly the entire global population is exposed to air quality levels that exceed World Health Organization (WHO) safety limits.

- ***Objective:***

This review aims to synthesize current scientific evidence regarding the specific cellular mechanisms through which pollutants induce respiratory damage and to evaluate the resulting clinical manifestations across the human lifespan.

- ***Methods:***

A structured review of the literature was performed, analyzing 15 high-impact core publications, including official WHO guidelines, ERS/ATS policy statements, and landmark longitudinal cohort studies.

- ***Results:***

The analysis identifies three primary pathophysiological pathways: (1) disruption of the respiratory epithelial barrier, (2) induction of systemic oxidative stress and pro-inflammatory signaling, and (3) immune system modulation via epigenetic modifications such as DNA methylation. These mechanisms are directly linked to the exacerbation of asthma, the progression of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), and increased lung cancer incidence. Furthermore, evidence suggests that while early-life exposure stunts pediatric lung development, environmental interventions can lead to measurable respiratory recovery.

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➢ ***Conclusion:***

Air pollution acts as a fundamental modifier of human biology. To mitigate the global crisis of respiratory morbidity, it is imperative to align national regulatory standards with current clinical evidence and WHO benchmarks.

Keywords: *Air Pollution, Particulate Matter, Respiratory Diseases, Pathophysiology, Epigenetics, Public Health.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Air pollution has emerged as the most significant environmental threat to global public health, representing a critical risk factor for the development and exacerbation of non-communicable diseases. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly the entire global population breathes air that exceeds recommended quality limits, leading to millions of premature deaths annually primarily due to respiratory and cardiovascular pathologies [1]. Ambient air pollution is a complex and heterogeneous mixture of particulate matter (PM2.5 and PM10) and gaseous pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide (NO2), ozone (O3), and sulfur dioxide (SO2), which interact dynamically with the respiratory system. The European Respiratory Society (ERS) and the American Thoracic Society (ATS) emphasize that adverse health effects of air pollution are not limited to overt clinical disease but also include subclinical inflammation, impaired lung development in children, reduced lung function, and increased population-level morbidity and mortality.[2]. Consequently, air pollution is no longer viewed merely as an external irritant but as a fundamental modifier of human biology. The systemic impact of these pollutants is profound, as the respiratory system serves as the primary portal of entry. Exposure to poor air quality triggers a cascade of biological responses, ranging from local tissue damage to systemic inflammatory states [3]. While the association between "smog" and respiratory distress has been recognized for decades, recent advancements in molecular biology have provided deeper insights into the specific pathways such as oxidative stress and epigenetic modifications - that link environmental exposure to chronic disease states.

➢ *Objective*

The objective of this review is to synthesize and analyze current scientific evidence regarding air pollution as a primary environmental risk factor for respiratory diseases. This paper aims to delineate the fundamental pathophysiological mechanisms - specifically focusing on epithelial barrier disruption, oxidative stress, and immune modulation and to evaluate their clinical implications across major respiratory pathologies, including asthma, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), and lung cancer, based on a curated selection of high-impact contemporary literature.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted as a structured review of the literature to synthesize the current understanding of the relationship between air pollution and respiratory health. The methodology focused on identifying high-impact peer reviewed publications that provide both mechanistic insights and clinical evidence.

➢ *Search Strategy*

A comprehensive search was performed across major medical and scientific databases, including PubMed/MEDLINE, Google Scholar, The Lancet, and the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA). The search terms utilized were a combination of MeSH terms and keywords, including: "air pollution," "particulate matter (PM2.5)," "pathophysiology," "respiratory diseases," "oxidative stress," "asthma," "COPD," and "epigenetic mechanisms."

➢ *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

The selection process was guided by the following criteria:

- Source Quality: Priority was given to official guidelines (WHO), joint policy statements from major respiratory societies (ERS/ATS), and articles published in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals.
- Relevance: Articles were included if they specifically addressed the pathophysiological pathways (e.g., epithelial barrier, immune response) or clinical outcomes (e.g., lung development, chronic disease exacerbation) associated with air pollution.
- Language and Date: The review focused on English language publications, with a strong emphasis on contemporary research published between 2014 and 2023 to ensure the inclusion of the most recent clinical trials and molecular findings.

➢ *Study Selection and Data Synthesis*

A total of 15 core publications were selected as the primary evidence base for this review. These sources represent a diverse range of study designs, including: 1. Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses providing broad epidemiological context. 2. Longitudinal Cohort Studies (e.g., the Children's Health Study) evaluating long-term clinical impacts. 3. Molecular and Cell Biology Studies detailing the mechanisms of oxidative stress and epigenetic modifications. The data extracted from these sources were synthesized using a thematic approach. Information was categorized into: (1) fundamental definitions and global standards, (2) cellular and molecular mechanisms of damage, and (3) clinical implications across different stages of life and specific disease states. This structured synthesis ensures

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a logical progression from environmental exposure to biological impact and clinical manifestation.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESULTS

➢ *Pathophysiological Mechanisms: From Inhalation to Cellular Damage*

The transition from environmental exposure to clinical disease is mediated by a complex series of biological events. The respiratory system, specifically the lung parenchyma and the conducting airways, represents the primary interface between the external environment and the internal milieu.

- *The Air-Liquid Interface and Epithelial Barrier Dysfunction*

The respiratory epithelium acts as the first line of defense against inhaled pollutants. According to the Forum of International Respiratory Societies (FIRS) [4], the epithelium is not merely a physical barrier but a dynamic immune organ. Exposure to particulate matter and gaseous pollutants compromises the "tight junctions" between epithelial cells. This increased permeability, often termed a "leaky" airway, allows for the deeper penetration of PM2.5 and ultra-fine particles into the sub-epithelial space, facilitating their entry into the systemic circulation. This disruption of the mucosal barrier is a fundamental step in the initiation of chronic airway inflammation and is a primary "portal of entry" for systemic non-communicable diseases.

- *Oxidative Stress and Pro-inflammatory Signaling*

At the molecular level, the damage induced by PM2.5 is primarily driven by the generation of Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS). As detailed by Woodby et al. [5], particles deposited in the alveoli trigger an imbalance between pro oxidants and the lung's endogenous antioxidant defenses. This oxidative stress leads to lipid peroxidation, protein carbonylation, and DNA damage. Furthermore, ROS act as signaling molecules that activate redox-sensitive transcription factors, such as NF-κB (Nuclear Factor kappa-light-chain enhancer of activated B cells). This activation results in the synthesis and release of pro-inflammatory cytokines, including IL-1β, IL-6, and TNF-α, which orchestrate a persistent state of chronic inflammation in the lung tissue.

- *Immunomodulation and Altered Host Defense*

The impact of air pollution extends to the modulation of both innate and adaptive immune responses. Glencross et al. [6] highlight that pollutants significantly impair the function of alveolar macrophages in the sentinel cells of the lung. When macrophages become overwhelmed by PM, their phagocytic capacity (the ability to "eat" and clear bacteria or viruses) is reduced, explaining the increased susceptibility to respiratory infections in polluted areas. Additionally, air pollution acts as an adjuvant for the adaptive immune system, skewing the response toward a Th2-polarized phenotype, which is a hallmark of allergic sensitization and the development of asthma. This immune "reprogramming" creates a state of heightened reactivity where the lungs respond more aggressively to common allergens and pathogens.

➢ *Clinical Implications:*

Chronic Respiratory Diseases The translation of molecular damage into clinical phenotypes is evident across a spectrum of chronic respiratory conditions. The cumulative effect of barrier dysfunction and chronic inflammation results in measurable disease progression and increased mortality.

- *Asthma:*

Sensitization and Exacerbation Air pollution is both a trigger for acute exacerbations and a likely causative factor in the development of new-onset asthma. Guarnieri and Balmes [7] demonstrate a robust association between traffic-related air pollution (TRAP) and increased emergency room visits for asthma. The pollutants act by enhancing the allergic response to inhaled aeroallergens. Furthering this, Chung [8] identifies that emerging mechanisms, such as the activation of the TRP (Transient Receptor Potential) channels in the airway nerves by pollutants, lead to immediate bronchoconstriction and airway hyper-reactivity. This research also points toward the use of specific surrogate markers, like fractional exhaled nitric oxide (FeNO), to monitor the inflammatory impact of smog on asthmatic patients.

- *Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and Emphysema*

While tobacco smoke remains the primary risk factor for COPD, ambient air pollution is a significant contributor to the disease burden, particularly in non-smokers. Wang et al. [9] provided landmark evidence using quantitative CT imaging, showing that long-term exposure to ambient air pollutants (specifically ozone) is significantly associated with an increase in percent emphysema and a faster decline in lung function (FEV1). This suggests that pollutants accelerate the "aging" of the lung tissue. Furthermore, Rhee et al. [10] highlight the clinical severity of this exposure, noting that long-term PM2.5 inhalation is directly correlated with increased mortality rates among COPD patients, independent of smoking history, due to frequent and more severe inflammatory exacerbations.

- *Lung Cancer:*

Genotoxicity and Carcinogenesis The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified outdoor air pollution as a Group 1 carcinogen. Turner et al. [11] provide an overview of the evidence, linking PM2.5 exposure to an increased risk of lung cancer, even at concentrations below current regulatory standards. The clinical implication is that the genotoxic effects, specifically the formation of DNA adducts and the impairment of DNA repair mechanisms caused by polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) bound to particulate matter lead to malignant transformations in the lung parenchyma. This risk is particularly pronounced in urban areas, where the density of carcinogenic pollutants is highest.

➢ *Impact on Vulnerable Populations:*

Pediatric Lung Development While air pollution affects all demographic groups, children represent a uniquely vulnerable population due to their ongoing physiological

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development and higher relative exposure levels.

- Physiological Susceptibility and Early-Life Exposure The vulnerability of children is rooted in both biological and behavioral factors. As synthesized by Pfeffer and Mudway [12], children have a higher minute ventilation rate relative to their body mass compared to adults, meaning they inhale a larger volume of pollutants per kilogram of body weight. Furthermore, their lungs are in a state of rapid growth and alveolarization, which continues well into adolescence. Exposure to PM2.5 and NO2 during these "critical windows" can lead to structural alterations, such as reduced alveolar complexity and increased airway wall thickness, effectively "programming" the individual for respiratory frailty later in life.
- Long-term Growth Deficits and the Impact of Policy Interventions The clinical hallmark of pediatric air pollution exposure is the failure to reach predicted peak lung function. However, evidence also suggests that these detrimental effects are partially reversible through environmental intervention. In a landmark longitudinal study, Gauderman et al. [13] followed cohorts of children in Southern California over a 20-year period of declining ambient pollution levels. The study provided robust evidence that improvements in air quality - specifically reductions in nitrogen dioxide and fine particulate matter - were directly associated with significant increases in the rate of lung-function growth (FEV1 and FVC). These findings are of immense clinical importance, as they demonstrate that reducing environmental risk factors during childhood can mitigate the risk of developing chronic obstructive diseases in adulthood, underscoring the necessity of stringent air quality standards as a primary preventive measure.

IV. DISCUSSION

The synthesis of the analyzed literature reveals a profound shift in our understanding of air pollution - from a simple respiratory irritant to a complex systemic modifier. By integrating molecular findings with epidemiological data, we can better understand the massive scale of the global health crisis.

➢ *Synthesis:*

From Epigenetic Modification to Global Disease Burden A critical link in the chain of causality is the relationship between environmental exposure and long-term immune reprogramming. While the global burden of disease attributed to air pollution, as estimated by Cohen et al. [14], highlights staggering numbers of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) lost, the "how" behind these statistics is increasingly found in epigenetics. Prunicki et al. [15] demonstrate that air pollution induces specific changes in DNA methylation, particularly affecting T-regulatory (Treg) cell function. These epigenetic "scars" lead to sustained immune dysregulation and increased allergic sensitization. This mechanism explains why the global rise in respiratory NCDs (Non-Communicable Diseases) persists even in populations where acute exposure levels have stabilized; the biological impact is not merely transient but encoded into the cellular memory of the respiratory system.

➢ *Knowledge Gaps:*

What Remains to Be Explored? Despite significant advancements, several critical gaps in our knowledge persist:

- The "Cocktail Effect": Most studies, including those reviewed here, focus on single pollutants (e.g., PM2.5 or O3). However, in real-world urban environments, individuals are exposed to a complex mixture of chemicals. The synergistic and antagonistic interactions between multiple pollutants remain poorly understood.
- Ultrafine Particles (UFPs): While PM2.5 is well documented, the impact of UFPs (particles < 0.1 μm) is less clear. Due to their minute size, they can bypass most biological barriers and translocate directly into the brain and other distal organs.
- Personalized Susceptibility: Why do certain individuals develop severe COPD or asthma under moderate exposure while others remain resilient? More research is needed into the genetic and microbiome-related factors that determine individual vulnerability.
- Long-term Low-level Exposure: As regulatory standards tighten, we need more longitudinal data on the effects of exposure at levels currently considered "safe" by many national governments but flagged as hazardous by the WHO.

➢ *Clinical Significance of WHO Guidelines*

The 2021 WHO Global Air Quality Guidelines [1] represent a turning point for clinical practice. By significantly lowering the recommended limits for PM2.5 and NO2 , the WHO has effectively signaled that there is no known safe level of exposure for the human respiratory system.

Clinically, this means:

- Diagnostic Integration: Physicians should include environmental exposure history as a standard part of respiratory assessments, similar to smoking history.
- Preventive Advocacy: The guidelines serve as a tool for clinicians to advocate for "environmental prescriptions" advising patients, particularly those in vulnerable groups identified by Pfeffer and Mudway [12], on using air filtration systems or avoiding high-traffic areas during peak pollution hours.
- Policy Alignment: The gap between current national regulations and WHO recommendations creates a "clinical hazard zone." Doctors must be aware that patients may experience adverse health effects, as defined by ERS/ATS [2], even when local air quality is reported as being "within legal limits."

In conclusion, the clinical management of respiratory diseases in the 21st century must look beyond the hospital walls and address the air our patients breathe as a fundamental determinant of their biological health.

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V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The synthesis of contemporary research presented in this review confirms that air pollution is not merely a peripheral environmental concern but a core pathophysiological driver of respiratory morbidity and mortality. By analyzing the provided evidence, the following conclusions and practical frameworks are established:

➢ *Summary of Main Evidence*

- Mechanistic Pathways: The respiratory system serves as the primary portal of entry [4], where pollutants specifically PM2.5 trigger a cascade of oxidative stress and chronic inflammation [5]. This leads to the disruption of the epithelial barrier and epigenetic reprogramming [15], which compromises the innate immune response and facilitates allergic sensitization [6].
- Clinical Impact: Exposure is definitively linked to the exacerbation of asthma [7, 8], the acceleration of emphysema and COPD progression [9, 10], and an increased risk of lung cancer [11].
- The Pediatric Window: Children are uniquely vulnerable. Early-life exposure can result in permanent deficits in lung function, yet evidence suggests that improvements in air quality can lead to measurable recovery in lung development rates [12, 13].
- Global Responsibility: The gap between current global health outcomes and the 2021 WHO Air Quality Guidelines [1] highlights a critical need for action, as even "low-level" exposure contributes to the global burden of non communicable diseases [14].

➢ *Practical Recommendations for Clinicians*

- Environmental History Taking: Physicians should integrate environmental exposure assessments into routine clinical practice. Asking patients about their proximity to high-traffic areas, occupational exposures, and indoor air quality is as vital as recording smoking history.
- Patient Education: Clinicians should provide "exposure reduction" advice to vulnerable groups (asthmatics, COPD patients, and parents of young children). This includes utilizing air quality monitoring apps, avoiding outdoor exercise during peak pollution hours, and using HEPA-grade indoor air purifiers.
- Advocacy for Protective Benchmarks: Medical professionals should utilize the WHO 2021 guidelines and ERS/ATS policy statements [2] as clinical benchmarks to advocate for patients' rights to clean air, particularly in urban settings.

➢ *Recommendations for Policymakers*

- Stringent Emission Standards: Transitioning national air quality standards to align with the WHO Global Air Quality Guidelines is a public health necessity to reduce long-term healthcare costs associated with chronic respiratory diseases.
- Urban Infrastructure and "Buffer Zones": Policymakers must prioritize the creation of "clean air zones" around schools, hospitals, and residential areas. Expanding green spaces and reducing traffic density in these zones is essential to protect developing pediatric lungs [13].
- Monitoring and Transparency: Investment in hyper-local air quality monitoring networks is required to provide real-time data to the public, enabling informed decision-making for both citizens and healthcare providers. In conclusion, addressing air pollution requires a multidisciplinary approach that bridges molecular biology, clinical medicine, and public policy. While the biological damage is profound, the evidence from the Children's Health Study [13] provides a powerful message of hope: aggressive environmental intervention works. Reducing air pollution is perhaps the most effective "preventive medicine" available to protect respiratory health across the lifespan.

DISCLOSURES

➢ *Author's Contribution:*

- Conceptualisation: Katarzyna Gajowniczek
- Methodology: Bianka Błaszkiewicz
- Software: Katarzyna Gajowniczek, Patrycja Łazicka Check: Katarzyna Gajowniczek, Magdalena Cyzio, Bianka Błaszkiewicz
- Formal analysis: Jakub Paprocki, Nicola Chrzanowska, Maria Nowakowska
- Investigation: Katarzyna Gajowniczek, Magdalena Cyzio, Oliwia Szustek
- Resources: Katarzyna Gajowniczek, Maria Nowakowska, Jakub Paprocki
- Data curation: Bianka Błaszkiewicz, Nicola Chrzanowska Writing-rough preparation: Katarzyna Gajowniczek, Bianka Błaszkiewicz, Jakub Paprocki, Magdalena Cyzio, Maria Nowakowska, Nicola Chrzanowska, Oliwia Szustek, Patrycja Łazicka
- Writing review and editing: Katarzyna Gajowniczek, Patrycja Łazicka, Magdalena Cyzio
- Project administration: Katarzyna Gajowniczek

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