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Pollution

Air pollution as bad for wellbeing as partner's death, say researchers

Authors of Can Clean Air Make You Happy? say exposure to nitrogen dioxide can be as damaging as 'big-hitting' life events

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Vehicles on the Marylebone Road in London. Photograph: Carl Court/Getty Images

The effect on wellbeing of exposure to nitrogen dioxide, a gas mostly produced in diesel fumes, is comparable to the toll from losing a job, ending a relationship or the death of a partner, research suggests.

The study found a "significant and negative association" between life satisfaction and levels of the pollutant, which causes lung problems . These effects were "substantive and comparable to that of many 'big-hitting' life events," according to the researchers behind Can Clean Air Make You Happy?.

Sarah J Knight and Peter Howley of York University took life satisfaction data from the British Household Panel Survey and UK Household Longitudinal Survey and compared it with detailed air quality records from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Given that far more people are exposed to to nitrogen dioxide than suffer unemployment or end a relationship, Knight and Howley suggest that the benefits to society from reducing such emissions would be substantive.



WHO: air pollution causes 7m premature deaths a year

The highest levels of nitrogen dioxide occur in London, with the lowest levels in parts of south-west England. The capital has the dubious honour of being home to the worst NO2 hotspot in Europe: Marylebone Road, which recorded the highest annual mean levels of the pollutant, more than double the legal EU limit.

Pollution from nitrogen oxides is responsible for tens of thousands of premature deaths across Europe, with the UK suffering a particularly high toll. Much of the pollution is produced by diesel cars, which emit about six times more than allowed in the official lab-based tests.

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The European Environment Agency said the UK had 11,940 premature deaths in 2013 from nitrogen dioxide. The number was down from 14,100 the previous year, but was still the second worst in Europe after Italy.

Modern diesel cars produce 10 times more toxic air pollution than heavy trucks and buses, according to European data released in January.

The European commission started legal action late last year against the UK and six other EU members for failing to act against car emissions cheating in the wake of the Volkswagen dieselgate scandal.

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