

Policy Brief

September 2025

Climate change and ageing: perspectives from health and social care professionals

Study context

- Climate change is recognised as the greatest threat to health in the 21st century.
- Older people are among the most vulnerable due to chronic diseases, reduced ability to adapt, and social/economic factors.
- Health and social sector professionals work with this population on a daily basis and can strengthen their resilience.
- There was a gap in knowledge about how these professionals perceive risks, barriers and training needs.
- The European chAnGE project (Erasmus+, 2023–2026) involves partners from Ireland, Portugal, Finland, Austria and Greece to develop innovative educational solutions.

Summary of conclusions

- Professionals recognise the impact of climate change on older people but face a lack of time, resources and training.
- Institutional support and practical training are urgently needed to transform awareness into effective action.

Introduction

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges to global health, affecting older people in particular due to their physical and social vulnerability.

Although the European chAnGE project (*Climate change and healthy AgeinG: co-creating E-learning for resilience and adaptation*) highlights the importance of training professionals to adapt to climate change, little is known in Portugal about how health and social sector professionals perceive this impact and whether they feel prepared to act.

This study sought to address this gap, with the aim of identifying the concerns, barriers and needs of these professionals, who work with the elderly population on a daily basis and play an essential role in promoting community resilience to climate change.

Research summary

The study surveyed 150 health and social service professionals in Portugal - in the network of Assisted Living Facilities for the elderly and **day centres** - including nurses, doctors, carers, psychologists, social workers, socio-cultural animators, nutritionists and managers.

The questionnaire combined *Likert* scales, multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions to capture perceptions, barriers and needs.

The analysis revealed high awareness of the risks of climate change, a strong sense of responsibility in communicating with older people and families, but also significant limitations in terms of time, resources and training.

These results highlight the urgent need to empower professionals who are at the forefront of caring for a population increasingly exposed to climate impacts.

Results

The survey of 150 health and social care professionals reveals high awareness but also significant barriers to action:



1-Awareness: Over 90% recognise climate change as a reality caused by human action. 82.5% are concerned about its impacts; 80.6% see older people as the most affected group.

2-Responsibility: Almost 80% feel a duty to inform older people and families about climate risks.

3-Barriers: 51.4% point to lack of time; 46.6% lack of resources/guidance. A minority say it is not their responsibility.



4-Training: 89.4% consider continuing education, especially practical training, to be essential. There is an expectation for short training courses and the creation of "*climate champions*."

Conclusion: there is awareness and willingness, but there is a lack of resources, training, and organisational and political support to turn intention into practice.

Conclusions

The research shows that health and social care workers are attentive, concerned and aware of the risks that climate change poses to older people. However, they feel **alone, overwhelmed and ill-equipped** to translate this awareness into effective action.

The good news is that the will to act exists. More than eight (8) out of ten (10) professionals recognise the impact of climate change on older people, and almost all identify the need for training and resources to intervene. What is lacking is not motivation, but **political, institutional and educational support**.

Investing in this area means protecting not only the elderly, but also the very future of health and social systems. In a rapidly ageing Europe facing increasingly intense climate crises, preparing professionals means investing in **resilience, dignity and quality of life**.

Policy recommendations

Based on the study results and the literature (IPCC 2023; WHO 2021, 2024; EPA 2023):

1. **Mandatory continuing education** on climate, health and ageing for health and social care professionals across the EU.
2. **Curricular integration** of the topic into basic courses (nursing, medicine, gerontology, social work) and professional training programmes.
3. **Institutional support** with resources (time, practical guides, digital tools) so that professionals can take action in the field.
4. **Specific communication strategies** for older people and carers, including early warnings and practical recommendations for heatwaves, air quality and food safety.
5. **Inclusive environmental planning**, ensuring adapted housing, green spaces, shade, , adequate ventilation, and climate risk management tailored to the needs of the elderly population.
6. **Combating social and energy inequalities**, ensuring that older people, regardless of their economic status, have access to safe and healthy environments.

Bibliographic references:

1. **WHO (2024)**. Climate change. Geneva: World Health Organisation. Available at: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/climate-change> [accessed in September 2025].
2. **WHO (2021)**. A call for strengthening climate change education for all health professionals. An open letter to universities and all education stakeholders. WHO-CS Working Group to advance action on Health and Climate Change. Geneva: World Health Organisation.
3. **IPCC (2023)**. Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.
4. **EPA (2023)**. Climate change and health of older adults. United States Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: <https://www.epa.gov/climateimpacts/climate-change-and-health-older-adults> [accessed in Sept. 2025].
5. **Varis, K. & Palviainen, N. (2024)**. Interventions supporting older adults in the context of climate change: a scoping review. Karelia University of Applied Sciences.

Authors and Project

André Rodrigues¹; Ana Assunção²; Cátia Costa³; Fátima Baptista²; Filomena Carnide²; Hugo Lucas¹; Paulo Fonseca³; Rita Rosado-Ramos³; Suzanne Timmons⁴

1 – *Emeis Portugal*; 2 – *CIPER, Faculty of Human Kinetics, University of Lisbon*; 3 – *Hospital da Luz Learning Health*;

4 – *University College Cork*

Project chAnGE – Climate change and healthy AgeinG: co-creating E-learning for resilience and adaptation.

Acknowledgements and funding

This project is co-funded by the European Union. Project ID: 101109005 of the ERASMUS2027 Programme

Funded by the European Union. **The views and opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Union or the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the EACEA can be held responsible for these opinions.**