

The False Promise of Natural Gas

Health and Environmental Hazards of Natural Gas.*		
Category	Pathways and Mechanisms	Established and Potential Health Hazards
Local hazards		
Water contamination	Ground and surface water at gas wells is contaminated with fracking chemicals.	Many fracking chemicals are toxic: 25% are carcinogens; 75% are dermal, ocular, respiratory, and gastrointestinal toxins; 40 to 50% have toxic nervous, immune, cardiovascular, and renal effects; 30 to 40% are endocrine disrupters
Air pollution	Heavy trucks, construction equipment, and drill rigs emit diesel exhaust, oxides of nitrogen, and particulates; sand piles release silica dust; gas venting and flaring produce volatile organic compounds (benzene, 1,3-butadiene, and formaldehyde).	Exacerbation of asthma and COPD; increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes; increased risk of prematurity and low birth weight; volatile organic compounds increase risk for leukemia and lymphoma
Noise pollution	Heavy equipment and gas flaring generate nearly continuous noise; sound levels can reach 70 A-weighted decibels, which exceeds EPA community guidelines.	Sleep disturbance; stress (associated with increased cardiovascular disease risk); cognitive deficits in children
Light pollution	High-intensity illumination and gas flaring generate bright light day and night	Sleep disturbance; stress
Radionuclide releases	Some shale formations contain naturally occurring radionuclides such as radon, principally in Pennsylvania and Texas.	Cancers, chiefly lung cancer
Earthquakes	Seismic activity is increased near fracking sites and up to 30 miles away.	Injuries; anxiety; loss of property value
Community disruption	Poor and minority communities are disproportionately exposed to noise, toxic chemicals, and explosion hazards.	Mental health problems; substance abuse; sexually transmitted diseases
Regional hazards		
Fires and explosions	Pipeline explosions occur every year in the United States and recently occurred in Armada Township, MI; Refugio, TX; Salem, PA; Watford City, ND; and Merrimack Valley, MA.	Injury; death
Air pollution from gas combustion	Gas combustion in stoves, boilers, and furnaces generates oxides of nitrogen.	Increased asthma risk; exacerbation of COPD and cardiovascular disease
Global hazards		
Contributions to climate change	Use of natural gas causes methane leakage and gas combustion generates carbon dioxide.	Heat waves; extreme weather events; droughts; floods; wildfires; expanded ranges of vectorborne diseases; compromised food supplies resulting in famine, migration, conflict, and mental distress

* COPD denotes chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and EPA Environmental Protection Agency. Sources of information are listed in the Supplementary Appendix, available at NEJM.org.