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What is fuel poverty and how does it affect our health?

The soaring cost of living and rise in gas prices has led to a surge in the number of households struggling to afford heat and electricity. The energy crisis has led to a sharp rise in fuel poverty, but what exactly does this mean?

What is fuel poverty?

Fuel poverty means being unable to afford to heat your home to a safe and comfortable standard. A household is usually classed as being in fuel poverty when they spend ten percent or more of their net income on fuel.

There are a number of factors that contribute to fuel poverty. Low or stagnant incomes, high fuel prices, unaffordable housing prices, and poor quality rental housing can have an impact on people's ability to heat their homes.

A rise in energy costs has led to a significant increase in fuel poverty in the UK. In April 2022, average household energy bills increased by 54% from £1,277 to £1,971¹ – and rose again to £2,500 in October². As a result, an increasing number of people are struggling financially and having to make difficult decisions, such as choosing between heating their homes and buying food.

Between October 2021 and April 2022, National Energy Action estimated that the number of UK households in fuel poverty increased from 4.5 million to 6.5 million³. More people are expected to be plunged into fuel poverty as [winter](#) sets in.

How does fuel poverty affect health?

Fuel poverty has a detrimental impact on our health and wellbeing. Some existing health conditions can be affected badly by cold and others can be brought on as a result of prolonged exposure to the cold. Living in a cold, damp home can increase the risk of cardiovascular problems, especially among vulnerable people such as the [elderly](#).

In cold temperatures, blood tends to thicken, leading to an increase in [blood pressure](#) and increased risk of [heart attack](#) and [stroke](#) as the heart works harder to pump blood around the body⁴.

Being cold also affects our body's ability to fight off infection. Lung conditions and [coughs](#) can develop into a more serious problem, such as [pneumonia](#).

Cold conditions in a home can also contribute to dampness and mould growth, which can lead to [breathing problems](#). Mould spores and dust mites in the air can cause allergic reactions, which in turn can cause issues for people with respiratory illnesses such as [asthma](#).

Fuel poverty can also impact [mental health](#), leading to [stress](#), [anxiety](#) and [depression](#).

How does fuel poverty affect children?

Children in cold homes are more than twice as likely to suffer from [breathing problems](#) when compared to those in dry and warm homes⁵.

Poverty is a known risk factor when it comes to poor [mental health](#) and living in a cold home can also have a negative impact on children's education, as those with health issues caused by cold, damp homes may need time off school⁶. Children living in poverty may also struggle to concentrate on school if they are hungry or tired.

How to get help with fuel poverty

Speak to your energy supplier

If you're struggling to afford your [bills](#), speak to your supplier to see if you can alter your payment plans. Providers have ways to be able to support their customers, so talking to them as soon as possible is important to tackle fuel poverty.

Seek financial support

There are various ways to get support if you're struggling financially. You can check if you are eligible for benefits on [Gov.uk](#). The government will send you a 'cost of living payment' if you get certain benefits, such as Universal Credit, PIP or Attendance Allowance. You will also be eligible if you are over State Pension age and get Winter Fuel Payments.

You may be able to apply to your council's local welfare assistance scheme. Each local authority runs their own scheme – some offer small grants or food vouchers.

Get help via a charity

Some charities offer support services and help people access grants and benefits, including [Turn2Us](#) and the debt charity [StepChange](#). [Citizens Advice](#) also has helpful information regarding energy bills, benefits and financial support.

It's important not to struggle alone, even though it can be challenging to talk about [financial worries](#).

Further reading

[UK Parliament: Domestic energy prices](#)

[Energy Saving Trust: How will energy bills go down?](#)

[National Energy Action: Energy crisis](#)

[NHS England: Cold weather increases risk of heart attack and stroke](#)

[Guertler et al: Fact-File: Families and fuel poverty](#)

[National Education Union: Child poverty – the facts](#)

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