

Public health crisis looms as roads turn rivers

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New Delhi: The overflowing Yamuna has raised the spectre of an impending public health calamity in Delhi.

"There is going to be a public health emergency if enough attention is not given. The impact of floods in urban landscapes is very different from that in rural areas and hence more complicated. In Delhi, water sources are interconnected, which makes it challenging to address the problem. So, contamination of water is not just restricted to the Yamuna river but could reach other sources," Dr Chandrakant Lahariya, a public health expert, said.

TOI tried to reach out to state health department and district officials to understand if the authorities were taking steps to prevent a disease outbreak. No one was available to comment on the matter.

Many diseases are water-borne and infect people through contaminated water sources and poor sanitation. Diarrheal diseases such as cholera, jaundice, viral fever, dysentery, hepatitis A, conjunctivitis, leptospirosis and typhoid are some of the threats.

"There can be major health



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issues that can creep up now as well as when the water level goes down. The drains will be blocked and roads could be flooded. There can be respiratory tract infections, viral and bacterial diseases. During this season too, there can be respiratory problems owing to humidity, and people getting wet," Dr Suranjit Chatterjee, senior consultant on internal medicine at Indraprastha Apollo, said.

Once the water recedes, there is a high chance that some of it will remain stored in certain places

that act as a breeding ground for vector-borne diseases such as dengue, malaria and chikungunya.

"With water treatment plants shut, the supply of water will decrease. That will lead to problems. One of the major health problems common in urban flooding is leptospirosis, a bacterial blood infection that targets humans and other animals," Dr Jugal Kishore, director and professor at Safdarjung Hospital, said.

"So in the first week of flooding, cases like cholera, jaundice, and viral fever might hap-

pen. Then from the second week onwards, the dengue or malaria risk increases," he added.

Flooding usually carries water that is contaminated with toxic chemicals, heavy metals, pesticides, biotoxins, sewage and water-borne pathogens into buildings.

The water might affect not just those who have been displaced but even those in posh neighbourhoods. Once the water recedes, toxic contaminants remain in the dried sediments. When disturbed through everyday actions like walking and cleaning, they become microscopic air-borne dust. That dried flood sediment—the toxic chemicals, the metals, the biotoxins—mixes in the air and affects respiratory health.

Experts noted that those who have been displaced and rehabilitated face a high risk of disease. Since they are accommodated in a small space, it leads to overcrowding, so people have a higher chance of facing food poisoning and skin infections.

"Mental stress also increases. Those from the psychiatry department should go and interact with those who are displaced. The hospitals need to gear up to face any such unprecedented surge or outbreak. Those facilities

TIMES VIEW: Misfortune seldom comes alone. The flood waters, which have forced displacement of thousands, can also be a carrier of diseases. The health department should be on its toes to ensure that it does not lead to widespread water-borne ailments. Breeding of mosquitoes also needs to be checked.

es that are near the flooded regions should be prepared to tackle patients. Snake venom medicine and other animal bite medicines should be stocked up on. People should not die because of the non-availability of these drugs," Dr Kishore said.

Dr Lahariya pointed out that essential health services should continue and that the lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic can be utilised to control a major outbreak.

"In a situation where there is a natural disaster, it is difficult to prevent the spread of such diseases. Now the priority is to save lives. Hygienic portable water needs to be provided to those who have been moved to shelters. Else, there can be several infections," Dr Chatterjee said.