

The main factor of polluted air in the Western Balkans are powdered substances (PM), which negatively affect the same cells and cell parts in the human body as coronavirus. Therefore, in people who are daily exposed to air pollution of the immune system, the body's response to the presence of coronavirus is more violent, which contributes to the development of more severe forms of Covid-19, while deaths are more frequent. Prolonged exposure to harmful substances in the air increases the risk of acute and chronic diseases, most often those that affect the respiratory system. Due to impaired function, it becomes more susceptible to viral infections, including those caused by coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). At the very beginning of the global pandemic, research and studies have begun to appear that link the increased number of cases and deaths from Covid-19 in regions where the air is more polluted. Before quoting the results of some research, it is important to note that a positive correlation between air pollution and the number of people suffering from Covid-19 is a priori expected because air pollution is correlated with high population density, time and high mortality. Long-term epidemiological studies, taking into account many factors, are needed to clearly determine that air pollution contributes to the risk of death from Covid-19. Such scientific papers are still under construction and we cannot speak with one hundred percent certainty that there is a causal link between air pollution and Covid-19. Studies from China, England, the United States, Germany, the Netherlands and Italy have shown that increased air pollution can be used to increase the number of patients, but also to increase mortality from Covid-19. A study in Germany showed an increase in the concentration of PM10 particles increases the mortality of Covid-19 patients over the age of 80, by up to 30% in men and 35% in women. When these data are compared, it is concluded that air pollution increases mortality from Covid-19 in the world by 15%, and in Europe by 19%. As already mentioned, the main factor in air pollution are powdery substances, and an increase in their concentration of one microgram per cubic meter increases the mortality from Covid-19 by 11%.

Unfortunately, there are still no relevant studies and research for the Western Balkans region, and we are not able to offer specific data. It is very likely that these data would not differ for this region, there is even an assumption that they would be worse. Even without the impact of Covid-19, air pollution in the region on an annual basis, caused almost 13,500 cases of premature death, while now Covid-19 has infected 693,902 people, and 13,423 people have died as a result of the disease.

**How to improve the epidemiological situation and air purification in the Western Balkans?**

When proposing measures, it is necessary to take into account the state of the health systems of the Western Balkan countries. During the pandemic, the consequences of the lack of hospital beds, the immigration of doctors and medical staff, the lack of respirators and other equipment, as well as the general lack of investment were shown throughout the region. At the time it is affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, the pressure on these health systems often exceeds the maximum. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the participation of health sector representatives in decision-making processes, in order to ensure the timely integration of health measures into environmental policies.

The governments of the Western Balkans must respond and increase efficiency in enforcing environmental laws and decisions to achieve greater health and economic benefits for all citizens. Coal-fired power plants in the Western Balkans alone are responsible for economic damage in the name of health costs on an annual level of 1.9-3.6 billion euros, which has brought the citizens of the Western Balkans.

In the end, it should be pointed out that COVID-19 will be a thing of the past at some point, but that air pollution must not remain the old “normality”. Timely response implies only the improvement of air quality to be included in public policies and recovery plans from the COVID-19 pandemic in accordance with the obligations from the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, which have been accepted by all countries.

Source: reri.org.rs