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Understanding El Niño: Weather, Air Quality, and Environmental Health

The weather can affect the air around us, our living conditions, and our safety. With El Niño stronger this year, understanding what it is and how it affects us can help us prepare for changing conditions.

What is El Niño?

El Niño is the warmer phase of a climate pattern that occurs in the tropical Pacific Ocean. When changes in ocean temperatures mix with the atmosphere, wind and rain patterns can change and influence the weather. Some places around the world can go through wetter conditions, while others endure more heat and drought.

The U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) states that even a powerful El Niño does not always directly create local impacts, and we can't always predict what will happen. For this reason, it is important to stay on top of local weather alerts to be aware of impacts in your own community.

What is the connection between weather and air quality?

Pollutants can move and accumulate in particular areas depending on the weather. For example, hotter and dryer regions are more prone to wildfires. Wildfire smoke can affect communities, travelling thousands of kilometers, affecting the air quality of even those who live far away. Keeping track of local air quality information can help make informed decisions on whether it is safe to go outside.

The effect on indoor environments

Pollutants can also affect indoor air quality (IAQ). They can enter buildings through windows, cracks, and doors, which is why it is essential to maintain proper ventilation, repair moisture issues, and use filters.

Heavy rain, flooding, and leaks can cause water damage that requires attention. These conditions can encourage the growth of mould, which can also affect IAQ. El Niño can contribute to these issues, but local conditions should be carefully monitored regardless.

Taking the time to prepare

When it comes to environmental preparedness, it is important to keep those living with MCS in mind. Communities should ensure that cooling centres, shelters, and other public spaces are scent-free and accessible to all.

Some tips to help face the months ahead include:

- **Check weather alerts:** Stay informed with your local news or weather app, to keep track of extreme weather alerts, warnings, and the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) of Infosmog. Use this information to make smart decisions on daily activities.
- **Prepare the indoor environment:** Repair leaks or damp areas, and reduce sources of pollution.
- **Use filtration:** Air cleaners and reduce particles in the air, making it safe to breathe,
- **Discuss access needs in advance:** Ask community spaces about scent-free policies, products used, and accessibility requirements before an emergency takes place.

This year's El Niño is a reminder to keep the connection between weather and environmental health in mind. By staying informed and prepared, we can respond to changes with confidence.

References:

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