

**PAN AMERICAN  
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**EL NIÑO AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTH**

El Niño events are notable for their wide geographic influence and the long duration of their extremes. The fact that they are extended climate events with large-scale effects makes them extremely important to the public health sector. The ability to project future El Niño events gives the public health sector the opportunity to prepare for and to better control the transmission of disease.

Both the health services infrastructure and basic sanitation services were damaged by El Niño in 1997-1998. At present, no concrete data are available that demonstrate that the incidence of infectious diseases is consistently and reliably related to El Niño events. The countries developed disaster mitigation programs prior to the appearance of El Niño.

There is a need to develop a scientific agenda that will examine the impact of extreme events such as El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO) on human and animal health, as well as on health infrastructure and services. Attention should be paid to the vulnerability of ecosystems to ENSO, how disease incidence will respond to extreme climatic events, and how health programs will adjust to changes in morbidity and mortality caused by climate change.

This document summarizes existing knowledge of the effect of El Niño on health. Much is known, but there is much more to be learned. The document is presented to the 122nd Session of the Executive Committee of PAHO to inform it of the latest data on the impact of El Niño and to seek input from the Committee on the role that PAHO should play in addressing the health effects that could occur due to this environmental phenomenon.