

All-cause, cardiovascular, and respiratory mortality and wildfire-related ozone: a multicountry two-stage time series analysis



Gongbo Chen, Yuming Guo, Xu Yue, Rongbin Xu, Wenhua Yu, Tingting Ye, Shilu Tong, Antonio Gasparrini, Michelle L Bell, Ben Armstrong, Joel Schwartz, Jouni J K Jaakkola, Eric Lavigne, Paulo Hilario Nascimento Saldiva, Haidong Kan, Dominic Royé, Aleš Urban, Ana Maria Vicedo-Cabrera, Aurelio Tobias, Bertil Forsberg, Francesco Sera, Yadong Lei, Michael J Abramson, Shanshan Li, on behalf of the Multi-Country Multi-City Collaborative Research Network*

Summary

Background Wildfire activity is an important source of tropospheric ozone (O₃) pollution. However, no study to date has systematically examined the associations of wildfire-related O₃ exposure with mortality globally.

Methods We did a multicountry two-stage time series analysis. From the Multi-City Multi-Country (MCC) Collaborative Research Network, data on daily all-cause, cardiovascular, and respiratory deaths were obtained from 749 locations in 43 countries or areas, representing overlapping periods from Jan 1, 2000, to Dec 31, 2016. We estimated the daily concentration of wildfire-related O₃ in study locations using a chemical transport model, and then calibrated and downscaled O₃ estimates to a resolution of 0.25° × 0.25° (approximately 28 km² at the equator). Using a random-effects meta-analysis, we examined the associations of short-term wildfire-related O₃ exposure (lag period of 0–2 days) with daily mortality, first at the location level and then pooled at the country, regional, and global levels. Annual excess mortality fraction in each location attributable to wildfire-related O₃ was calculated with pooled effect estimates and used to obtain excess mortality fractions at country, regional, and global levels.

Findings Between 2000 and 2016, the highest maximum daily wildfire-related O₃ concentrations (≥30 µg/m³) were observed in locations in South America, central America, and southeastern Asia, and the country of South Africa. Across all locations, an increase of 1 µg/m³ in the mean daily concentration of wildfire-related O₃ during lag 0–2 days was associated with increases of 0.55% (95% CI 0.29 to 0.80) in daily all-cause mortality, 0.44% (−0.10 to 0.99) in daily cardiovascular mortality, and 0.82% (0.18 to 1.47) in daily respiratory mortality. The associations of daily mortality rates with wildfire-related O₃ exposure showed substantial geographical heterogeneity at the country and regional levels. Across all locations, estimated annual excess mortality fractions of 0.58% (95% CI 0.31 to 0.85; 31606 deaths [95% CI 17038 to 46027]) for all-cause mortality, 0.41% (−0.10 to 0.91; 5249 [−1244 to 11620]) for cardiovascular mortality, and 0.86% (0.18 to 1.51; 4657 [999 to 8206]) for respiratory mortality were attributable to short-term exposure to wildfire-related O₃.

Interpretation In this study, we observed an increase in all-cause and respiratory mortality associated with short-term wildfire-related O₃ exposure. Effective risk and smoke management strategies should be implemented to protect the public from the impacts of wildfires.

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Introduction

In the past few decades, wildfire occurrence has increased worldwide, with widened geographical extent and prolonged fire seasons.¹ In recent years, many locations globally have had unprecedented wildfires, including Australia, Brazil, northern California (USA), Canada, and the Mediterranean region of Europe, causing substantial economic loss and health impacts.^{2–6} For example, the total economic cost due to wildfires in California during 2018 was estimated to be US\$148.5 billion (95% CI 126.1–192.9), accounting for approximately 1.5% of annual gross domestic product (GDP) in the state.⁷ Due to rapid

climate change and population growth, the occurrence and related health burden of wildfires are expected to increase in the future.⁸

Both wildfires and planned or controlled fires are categorised as landscape fires, with wildfires comprising the predominant share (approximately 95%) of such occurrences.¹ Wildfire smoke is a chemically complex mixture of contaminants that are hazardous to human health, including particulate matter, ozone (O₃), and other toxic gaseous pollutants.⁹ A growing body of scientific literature has examined the health impacts from wildfire-related air pollutants. However, the majority of previous

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*Other members listed at the end of the Article

School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia (G Chen PhD, Prof Y Guo PhD, R Xu PhD, W Yu MPH, T Ye MSc, Prof M J Abramson PhD, Prof S Li PhD); Jiangsu Key Laboratory of Atmospheric Environment Monitoring and Pollution Control, Collaborative Innovation Center of Atmospheric Environment and Equipment Technology, School of Environmental Science and Engineering, Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology, Nanjing, China (Prof X Yue PhD); National Institute of Environmental Health, Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Beijing, China (Prof S Tong PhD); School of Public Health and Social Work, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD, Australia (Prof S Tong); Department of Public Health Environments and Society, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK (Prof A Gasparrini PhD, Prof B Armstrong PhD); School of the Environment, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA (Prof M L Bell PhD); School of Health Policy and Management, College of Health Sciences, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea (Prof M L Bell); Department of Environmental Health, Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University, Boston, MA, USA (Prof J Schwartz PhD); Center for Environmental and Respiratory Health Research, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland (Prof J J Jaakkola PhD); Medical

Research Center Oulu, Oulu University Hospital and University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland (Prof J J K Jaakkola); Finnish Meteorological Institute, Helsinki, Finland (Prof J J K Jaakkola); School of Epidemiology and Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada (E Lavigne PhD); Environmental Health Science and Research Bureau, Health Canada, Ottawa, ON, Canada (E Lavigne); INSPER, São Paulo, Brazil (Prof P H N Saldiva PhD); Department of Environmental Health, School of Public Health, Fudan University, Shanghai, China (Prof H Kan PhD); Department of Geography, University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain (D Royé PhD); CIBER Epidemiology and Public Health, Madrid, Spain (D Royé); Institute of Atmospheric Physics, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague, Czech Republic (A Urban PhD); Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague, Czech Republic (A Urban); Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine and Oeschger Center for Climate Change Research, University of Bern, Bern, Switzerland (Prof A M Vicedo-Cabrera PhD); Institute of Environmental Assessment and Water Research, Spanish Council for Scientific Research, Barcelona, Spain (A Tobias PhD); School of Tropical Medicine and Global Health, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki, Japan (A Tobias); Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden (Prof B Forsberg PhD); Department of Statistics, Computer Science and Applications "G Parenti", University of Florence, Florence, Italy (F Sera PhD); State Key Laboratory of Severe Weather and Key Laboratory of Atmospheric Chemistry of China Meteorological Administration, Chinese Academy of Meteorological Sciences, Beijing, China (Y Lei PhD)

Research in context

Evidence before this study

Unprecedented wildfires have been occurring in many locations globally. Air pollution from wildfires has become a considerable public health concern, given the various adverse effects on health. According to previous research, air pollution from wildfire sources is significantly linked to an increased risk of death. To ascertain the latest evidence from Jan 1, 2000, to June 25, 2023, we did a systematic search on Google Scholar, Web of Science, and PubMed, using the following terms: ("wildfire" or "bushfire" or "fire") and ("ozone" or "O₃") and ("mortal*" or "fatal*" or "death*" or "dead*"). The language of publications was restricted to English and Chinese. Our search yielded a small number of studies investigating the impact of wildfire-related O₃ exposure on mortality. These studies showed statistically significant links between O₃ from wildfires and increased hospital admissions or mortality. However, the current evidence largely originates from localised or regional studies, with a notable absence of comprehensive assessments across regions globally.

Added value of this study

To our knowledge, this study is the first to systematically evaluate the associations of short-term wildfire-related O₃

studies have focused on fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}), with little knowledge about the health effects of O₃ from wildfire sources.¹⁰

O₃ is a highly reactive and oxidative gaseous pollutant that shows various toxic effects. Both short-term and long-term O₃ exposure has been linked to a number of adverse health effects, including respiratory and cardiovascular mortality and morbidity.¹¹ Wildfire activity is an important source of tropospheric O₃. Wildfires can contribute to tropospheric O₃ by releasing a large amount of O₃ precursors, such as nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and volatile organic compounds, which form O₃ by reacting in the presence of sunlight.^{12,13}

Existing studies on the adverse health effects of wildfire-related O₃ have either been challenged by accurate population exposure assessment or restricted to single location or country.^{14–16} To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has assessed the health effects or health burden of wildfire-related O₃ comprehensively across different populations and geographical regions globally. To fill these research gaps, we systematically analysed the associations between short-term exposure to wildfire-related O₃ and daily all-cause, cardiovascular, and respiratory mortality across various regions and populations worldwide, based on data from the established Multi-City Multi-Country (MCC) Collaborative Research Network. The MCC Network comprises international research teams collaborating on a programme dedicated to generating epidemiological evidence on associations between weather and health.

exposure with daily mortality across various regions and populations globally. We collected daily counts of all-cause, cardiovascular, and respiratory deaths from up to 749 locations in 43 countries or areas between 2000 and 2016. The daily concentration of O₃ from wildfire sources in study locations was estimated with a 3D GEOS-Chem model. We first examined the associations of short-term wildfire-related O₃ exposure with daily mortality at the location level, and then pooled results at the country, regional, and global levels via a random-effects meta-analysis. Across all locations, we found that short-term exposure to wildfire-related O₃ was associated with significant percentage increases in daily all-cause and respiratory mortality. No such significant increase was found for daily cardiovascular mortality.

Implications of all the available evidence

Based on multicountry assessment of exposure, this study presents epidemiological evidence showing an excess of deaths linked to short-term exposure to wildfire-related O₃. Effective risk management is required from policy makers and public health experts, involving actions to reduce exposure to wildfires.

Methods

Study design and data collection

We did a multicountry two-stage time series analysis to examine the associations between wildfire-related O₃ exposure and mortality. Time-series mortality data were collected from the database of the established MCC Network on Jan 15, 2021, at which time the database covered 750 locations (location refers to city or county) in 43 countries or areas. Based on data from the MCC Network, we have previously examined the excess mortality associated with urban air pollution and ambient temperature.^{17,18} Daily counts of deaths from all causes, cardiovascular causes (International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision [ICD-10] codes I00–I99), and respiratory causes (ICD-10 codes J00–J99) were collected from each location in overlapping periods from Jan 1, 2000, to Dec 31, 2016, with the extraction of cardiovascular and respiratory causes based on the underlying cause (the primary reason leading to death). Cardiovascular disease refers to a group of disorders of the heart and blood vessels, including coronary heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, peripheral arterial disease, rheumatic heart disease, congenital heart disease, and deep vein thrombosis and pulmonary embolism. In places where mortality data were unavailable for all causes, non-external cause mortality data (ICD-10 codes A0–R99) were used instead. The availability of all-cause mortality data (or non-external cause mortality data) was a prerequisite for inclusion, resulting in the inclusion of 749 locations in the 43 countries or areas. In addition, daily data on mean

temperature (°C) and relative humidity (%) and GDP per capita (US\$) were collected for each location from the MCC Network database, as in our previous study.¹⁸

Procedures

We estimated population-weighted exposure to wildfire-related O₃. As wildfires constitute most landscape fires worldwide, and distinguishing between wildfires and non-wildfires presents challenges with current satellite detection methods,¹ the prevailing approach involves the use of landscape fire exposure as a surrogate metric for wildfire exposure, as exemplified by initiatives such as the *Lancet* Countdown reports.^{19,20} The approach for estimation of daily wildfire-related O₃ concentration has been reported previously.¹ In brief, daily wildfire-related O₃ concentration across study locations was estimated with the 3D GEOS-Chem model (version 12.0.0). The model simulates tropospheric O₃ concentration based on the O₃-NO_x-hydrocarbon-aerosol chemical mechanisms for each global grid cell (2.0°×2.5° spatial resolution; about 220 km×280 km at the equator).^{21,22} O₃ photolysis rates were computed based on the Fast-JXv7.0 scheme.²³ Dry deposition of O₃ was computed based on a multiple-resistance model.²⁴ The fire emission data were from the Global Fire Emissions Database (version 4.1 with small fires, GFED4.1s),²⁵ in which the amount of biomass burned has been calculated with use of satellite-based burn area and active fire information.²⁶ In this study, daily O₃ perturbations caused by fires were calculated as the difference between simulations with and without fire emissions for each day and global grid cell from 2000 to 2016.

As no ground-level measurements were available specifically for wildfire-related O₃ concentration, the GEOS-Chem-derived wildfire-related O₃ concentration was validated, adjusted, and downscaled via a three-step approach, which is shown in detail in appendix 1 (pp 2–4). In brief, daily concentration of ambient O₃ from all sources derived from the GEOS-Chem model was compared with ground monitoring data from 6851 stations in 58 countries and areas (sources of ground monitoring data reported previously²⁷), and their difference was applied to calibrate wildfire-related O₃ concentration derived from the GEOS-Chem model. According to results of ten-fold cross-validation, the GEOS-Chem-derived O₃ concentration from all sources explained 80% of the variability of ground measurements globally ($R^2=80\%$), and the continent-specific results ranged from 43% to 82% (appendix 1 p 4). With use of the validated and adjusted model, daily concentration of wildfire-related O₃ was estimated in each of the 749 locations at 0.25°×0.25° spatial resolution (approximately 28 km² at the equator). For locations with multiple grid cells, the mean value of all cells that included each location was used.

We sourced annual population counts spanning from Jan 1, 2000, to Dec 31, 2016, for every 1 km×1 km grid through the WorldPop project.²⁸ These population data

were subsequently aggregated to a spatial resolution of 0.25°×0.25° to align with the daily wildfire-related O₃ data. To compute population-weighted mean daily wildfire-related O₃ exposure, we calculated the exposure by calculating the mean of the values of all 0.25°×0.25° grids that were fully or partially within the community boundaries. The community boundary information was obtained from OpenStreetMap (version 0.756). In this calculation, we weighted each grid's contribution based on its specific population count, multiplied by the proportion (0–100%) of the grid's area intersecting with the community.

Statistical analysis

We present the maximum, mean, and IQR of daily concentrations of population-weighted wildfire-related O₃ exposure for each study location during the study period, and the monthly mean of the maximum daily wildfire-related O₃ concentrations.

The associations of short-term exposure to O₃ from wildfire sources with daily mortality were first examined at each location with consideration of potential lag effects, and then the results were pooled at country, regional, and global levels. To examine the relationship of wildfire-related O₃ exposure with all-cause, cardiovascular, and respiratory mortality separately, a location-specific quasi-Poisson regression model was fitted to the time series, as follows:

$$\log(D_{ij})=bs(O_{3ij})+ns(\text{time}, 8/\text{year})+ns(\text{TEMP}_{ij}, 3)+dow_j$$

where D_{ij} is count of deaths in location i on day j , and $bs(O_{3ij})$ is the concentration of O₃ from wildfire sources fitted with use of a constrained distributed lag model, which can flexibly examine both the exposure-response relationship and lag effect (where bs is a function in the model that is used to generate the basis matrices for the two dimensions of predictor and lag).²⁹ According to the quasi-likelihood version of the Akaike information criterion (qAIC) for various lag times (appendix 1 p 5), we considered the cumulative effects (mean concentration) of wildfire-related O₃ on the current day and previous 2 days of exposure (lag 0–2 days), which is also consistent with our previous work.³⁰ In the model, $ns(\text{time}, 8/\text{year})$ is a time variable fitted with a natural cubic spline (with 8 degrees of freedom per year) to account for the long-term time trends and seasonality;¹⁷ $ns(\text{TEMP}_{ij}, 3)$ is mean temperature during lag 0–2 days fitted with a natural cubic spline (with 3 degrees of freedom).³¹ The selections of degrees of freedom for natural cubic splines of time and lag times for temperature were also based on the qAIC information. A range of potential degrees of freedom and lag days were considered and the ones with the smallest qAIC value were selected (appendix 1 pp 5–6). dow_j is day of the week, numbered from 1 to 7 (1 being Monday). In the model, the association between variability of O₃ concentration and that of counts of

Correspondence to:

Prof Yuming Guo, School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC 3004, Australia
yuming.guo@monash.edu

or

Prof Shanshan Li, School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC 3004, Australia
shanshan.li@monash.edu

For WorldPop see <https://www.worldpop.org/>

For OpenStreetMap see <https://www.openstreetmap.org/>

For the GEOS-Chem model see <http://wiki.seas.harvard.edu/geos-chem/>

For the Global Fire Emissions Database see <https://www.globalfiredata.org/>

See Online for appendix 1

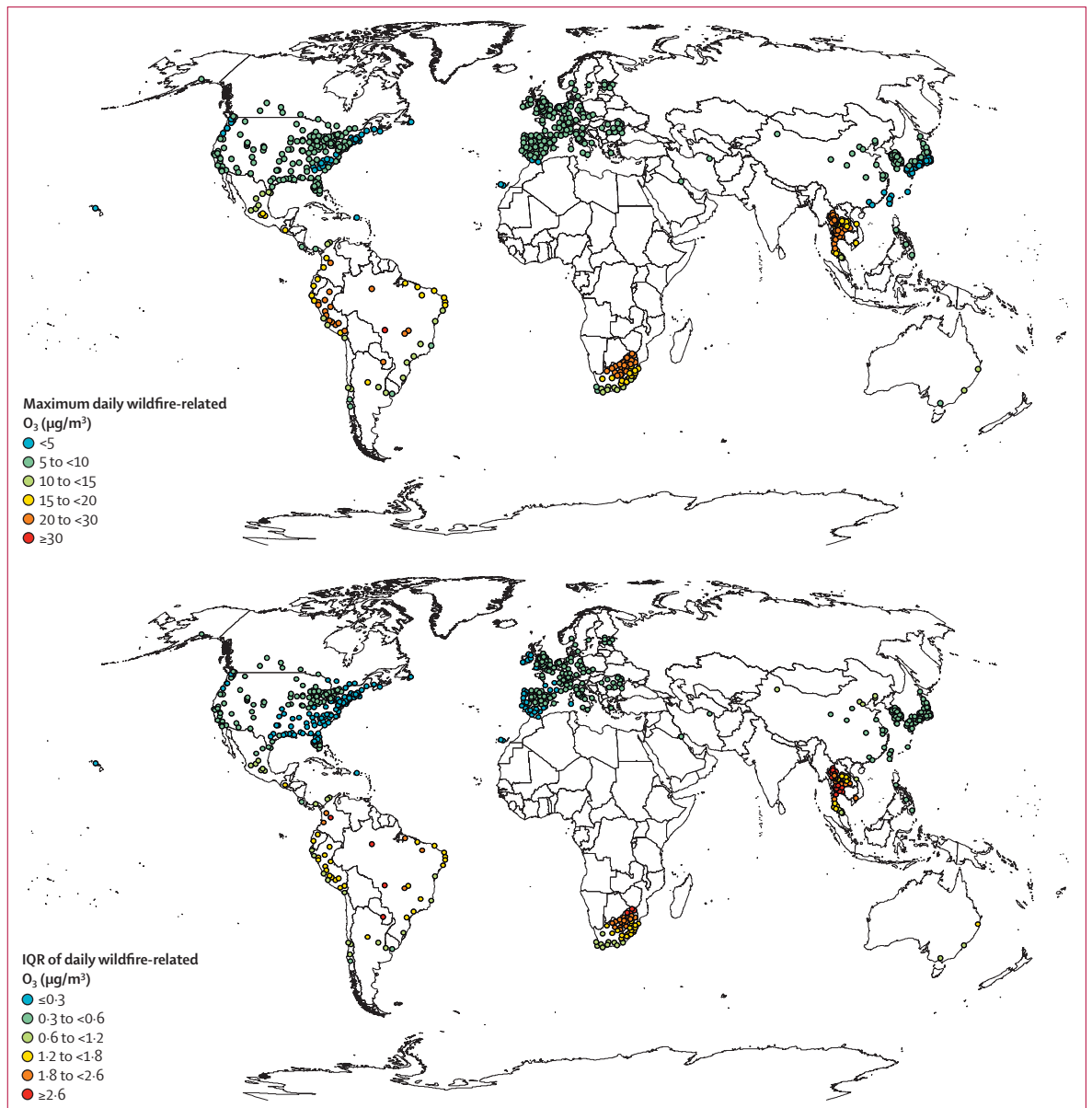


Figure 1: Maximum values and IQRs of daily concentrations ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$) of wildfire-related O_3 in 749 locations during 2000–16. Some datapoints overlap with others; the values for all locations are provided in appendix 2. The equator (0°) and the tropics (Tropic of Cancer and Tropic of Capricorn, 23.6°) are shown. IQR is shown as the difference between quartile 1 and quartile 3. O_3 =ozone.

deaths over time (per day) was examined for the whole study period.

The second-stage analysis pooled location-specific effect estimates at the country, regional, and global levels via a random-effect meta-analysis, which accounted for both within-location and between-location variabilities in effect estimates.³² Considering that the number of locations was small in some countries or areas and the mortality data did not cover the whole study period in some countries, we used the best linear unbiased predictions at this stage and set location as the random-effect term.³³ This approach has been shown to provide

estimates for countries accurately and robustly, especially for those with a small number of locations and short series of mortality data, as it uses information across units at the same hierarchical level.³³ To examine the variations of the O_3 –mortality association in different geographical regions and economic zones, location-specific results were also pooled for UN regions (based on the 22 geographical subregions of the UN geoscheme; some subregions had no locations and some subregions were combined due to small numbers of locations, resulting in a total of 11 regions; appendix 1 pp 7–8) and four economic zones according to location-specific GDP

per capita, using the same regions and GDP groups as in our previous study.³⁰

In this study, the O₃-mortality associations were expressed as percentage change in daily mortality (%) with 95% CIs per 1 µg/m³ increase in the concentration of O₃ from wildfire sources. Annual excess mortality fraction in each location attributable to acute effects of wildfire-related O₃ was calculated with use of the pooled effect estimates (% and 95% CI). Annual excess deaths for all-cause, cardiovascular, and respiratory causes were first calculated for each location separately, considering both the current-day and lag effects of wildfire-related O₃. Then, the sum of reported deaths in all locations was divided by the sum of excess deaths to derive the excess mortality fraction at the country, regional, and global levels. Details on the calculation of excess mortality fraction are shown in appendix 1 (p 4).

The associations between daily concentrations of non-wildfire-related O₃ and daily mortality were also examined, and excess mortality fractions attributable to non-wildfire O₃ exposure were calculated, with the same methods as those used for wildfire-related O₃. The daily concentration of O₃ from other sources was estimated as the difference between GEOS-Chem-derived O₃ from all sources and that from wildfires.

A series of sensitivity analyses was done to examine the robustness of results. In addition to controlling for time, temperature, and day of the week, we further controlled for wildfire-related PM_{2.5}, O₃ from other sources, and PM_{2.5} from all sources (mean daily concentrations for lag 0–2 days). The estimation of GEOS-Chem-derived daily PM_{2.5} from wildfire sources and all sources has been reported previously.³⁰ In addition, as data on relative ambient humidity were not available for 235 of 749 locations, a sensitivity analysis was done by further controlling for relative humidity in locations with available data. In another analysis, the degrees of freedom for temperature and relative humidity were changed to 4, 5, and 6 to test the robustness of the results. A two-sample test was used to examine the differences in effect estimates of the main models and these alternative models.³⁴

We did all statistical analyses using R (version 4.2.2) and the dlnm and mixmeta packages. We interpreted the statistical significance of effect estimates of wildfire-related O₃ based on 95% CIs, and the difference between two effect estimates in the sensitivity analyses based on p values.

Role of the funding source

There was no funding source for this study.

Results

A summary of study locations, study periods, and mortality data is presented in appendix 1 (pp 7–8). Among the 749 locations in 43 countries or areas across six continents (excluding Antarctica) with all-cause

mortality data (160 [21.4%] of 749 with non-external cause mortality data only), 629 (84.0%) locations had available cardiovascular mortality data, and 647 (86.4%) locations had available respiratory mortality data. In

	All-cause mortality	Cardiovascular mortality	Respiratory mortality
Argentina	-0.23% (-1.44 to 0.99)	NA	NA
Australia	<0.01% (-5.87 to 6.24)	NA	NA
Brazil	0.06% (-0.22 to 0.34)	NA	NA
Canada	1.56% (0.50 to 2.63)	0.09% (-0.58 to 0.76)	0.50% (-2.16 to 3.23)
Chile	1.82% (-2.84 to 6.71)	NA	NA
China	-0.68% (-2.13 to 0.79)	0.72% (0.47 to 0.97)	0.48% (-0.18 to 1.15)
Colombia	0.64% (-0.61 to 1.92)	0.45% (-0.48 to 1.39)	-0.97% (-2.34 to 0.41)
Costa Rica	1.13% (0.46 to 1.80)*	-0.04% (-23.40 to 30.46)*	2.19% (-12.66 to 19.57)*
Czech Republic	0.76% (-0.62 to 2.15)	0.47% (-2.64 to 3.68)	1.93% (-3.27 to 7.41)
Ecuador	0.77% (0.15 to 1.40)	1.71% (0.48 to 2.95)	-0.39% (-1.15 to 0.37)
Estonia	0.76% (-2.82 to 4.47)	NA	NA
Finland	3.23% (2.67 to 3.79)*	4.96% (-9.43 to 21.63)*	6.40% (4.49 to 8.35)*
France	0.39% (-1.18 to 1.99)	NA	-3.79% (-8.34 to 0.98)
Germany	-0.21% (-1.00 to 0.59)	NA	NA
Greece	0.98% (0.40 to 1.55)*	1.54% (-0.79 to 3.93)*	0.20% (-4.83 to 5.50)*
Guatemala	-0.04% (-1.21 to 1.14)*	NA	NA
Iran	1.75% (-11.20 to 16.59)*	3.34% (0.79 to 5.95)*	-4.96% (-6.08 to -3.84)*
Ireland	1.18% (-0.51 to 2.90)	3.12% (-0.77 to 7.17)	2.97% (-3.92 to 10.35)
Italy	-0.89% (-3.03 to 1.29)	NA	NA
Japan	0.41% (0.08 to 0.73)	1.11% (0.46 to 1.76)	0.72% (0.13 to 1.32)
Kuwait	-5.04% (-9.71 to -0.13)*	-5.82% (-15.52 to 4.99)*	-0.85% (-24.39 to 30.01)*
Mexico	-0.09% (-0.69 to 0.51)	-0.54% (-2.04 to 0.98)	1.15% (-2.79 to 5.25)
Moldova	7.23% (-0.64 to 15.74)	NA	NA
Netherlands	-0.90% (-2.94 to 1.18)	NA	NA
Norway	4.78% (1.49 to 8.18)*	4.38% (-7.02 to 17.19)*	1.43% (-14.08 to 19.73)*
Panama	-1.81% (-7.43 to 4.15)*	0.29% (-9.48 to 11.11)*	-9.87% (-19.10 to 0.42)*
Paraguay	-0.09% (-3.36 to 3.29)*	-0.31% (-6.16 to 5.90)*	0.81% (-9.99 to 12.91)*
Peru	-0.09% (-0.38 to 0.19)	NA	NA
Philippines	0.22% (-1.05 to 1.51)	-0.27% (-1.34 to 0.82)	-3.13% (-4.77 to -1.46)
Portugal	-0.87% (-1.58 to -0.15)	-1.67% (-6.69 to 3.61)	3.53% (-0.73 to 7.97)
Puerto Rico	0.93% (0.34 to 1.52)*	NA	NA
Romania	1.27% (0.15 to 2.40)	NA	NA
South Africa	0.12% (-0.04 to 0.27)	-0.06% (-0.44 to 0.34)	-0.30% (-0.72 to 0.13)
South Korea	0.43% (-0.31 to 1.18)	1.32% (-0.30 to 2.97)	0.66% (-0.93 to 2.29)
Spain	-0.13% (-1.11 to 0.85)	-1.39% (-3.01 to 0.26)	-2.04% (-4.58 to 0.57)
Sweden	-0.10% (-0.71 to 0.52)	-1.32% (-3.53 to 0.94)	4.59% (0.38 to 8.96)
Switzerland	-1.26% (-3.41 to 0.94)	-0.23% (-6.76 to 6.77)	-3.85% (-13.48 to 6.85)
Taiwan	1.02% (-3.15 to 5.37)	0.90% (-5.24 to 7.45)	1.99% (-6.59 to 11.37)
Thailand	0.57% (0.36 to 0.77)	0.45% (-0.01 to 0.91)	1.05% (0.54 to 1.57)
UK	1.30% (0.59 to 2.02)	0.34% (-0.95 to 1.64)	1.57% (-0.25 to 3.42)
Uruguay	0.38% (-2.97 to 3.86)*	NA	NA
USA	0.82% (0.14 to 1.51)	0.70% (-0.54 to 1.96)	1.49% (0.14 to 2.85)
Viet Nam	0.36% (-0.58 to 1.32)	0.40% (-4.14 to 5.16)	1.72% (-0.12 to 3.60)

Numbers in parentheses are 95% CIs. The main models were controlled for a time variable, ambient temperature, and day of the week at the first stage (location level), and included location as the random-effect term at the second stage (country or area level). For countries or areas with only one location, location-specific effect estimates were used to present the country or area-level results. NA=not available. *Location-specific estimates.

Table 1: Percentage change in mortality per 1 µg/m³ increase in mean daily concentration of wildfire-related ozone during lag 0–2 days in 43 countries or areas

	All-cause mortality	Cardiovascular mortality	Respiratory mortality
Region			
Australia	<0.01% (-5.87 to 6.24)	NA	NA
Central America	0.05% (-0.47 to 0.58)	-0.53% (-1.98 to 0.95)	0.25% (-3.71 to 4.38)
Central Europe	0.77% (-0.28 to 1.82)	0.11% (-4.44 to 4.89)	-3.09% (-7.07 to 1.07)
Eastern Asia	0.20% (-0.22 to 0.64)	1.15% (0.42 to 1.89)	0.77% (0.03 to 1.51)
Western Asia	-4.25% (-8.67 to 0.39)	0.21% (-8.01 to 9.17)	-4.96% (-6.07 to -3.83)
Northern America	0.89% (0.27 to 1.52)	0.70% (-0.45 to 1.85)	1.43% (0.19 to 2.69)
Northern Europe	1.22% (0.60 to 1.84)	0.51% (-0.68 to 1.71)	1.85% (0.19 to 3.54)
Southern Africa	0.12% (-0.04 to 0.27)	-0.06% (-0.44 to 0.34)	-0.30% (-0.72 to 0.13)
South America	0.21% (-0.29 to 0.73)	0.87% (0.05 to 1.68)	-0.52% (-1.18 to 0.15)
Southern Europe	-0.37% (-1.21 to 0.48)	-1.32% (-2.86 to 0.24)	-1.66% (-4.01 to 0.74)
Southeastern Asia	0.53% (0.33 to 0.73)	0.34% (-0.10 to 0.78)	0.74% (0.16 to 1.32)
Location-specific GDP per capita, US\$			
<10 000	0.37% (0.06 to 0.68)	0.35% (0.09 to 0.60)	0.19% (-0.34 to 0.73)
10 000–19 999	0.19% (-0.38 to 0.76)	-0.26% (-1.37 to 0.86)	-0.76% (-2.33 to 0.84)
20 000–29 999	1.38% (0.55 to 2.22)	0.76% (-0.40 to 1.93)	1.25% (-0.94 to 3.49)
≥30 000	0.66% (0.24 to 1.08)	0.66% (-0.20 to 1.54)	1.03% (0.06 to 2.01)

Pooled estimates are presented, with 95% CIs in parentheses. The main models were adjusted for a time variable, ambient temperature, and day of the week at the first stage (location level), and included location as the random-effect term at the second stage (regional level). GDP=gross domestic product. NA=not available.

Table 2: Percentage change in mortality per 1 µg/m³ increase in mean daily concentration of wildfire-related ozone during lag 0–2 days for different regions and GDP levels

total, 65.62 million deaths from all causes, 15.11 million deaths from cardiovascular causes, and 6.84 million deaths from respiratory causes were recorded in these locations between Jan 1, 2000, and Dec 31, 2016, over a median study period of 13 years (IQR 7–16). The maximum daily wildfire-related O₃ concentrations in all locations during 2000–16 are shown in figure 1 and appendix 2. Regions with locations with the highest maximum daily wildfire-related O₃ (≥30 µg/m³) were South America, central America, and southeastern Asia; the top three locations with the highest concentrations were Cuiaba (Brazil), Ucayali (Peru), and Guatemala. Locations in Thailand, such as Chanthaburi, and South Africa, such as Vhembe, also showed high maximum daily wildfire-related O₃ (≥30 µg/m³). The lowest concentrations (<5 µg/m³) were observed in locations northern America, eastern Asia, and central and southern Europe; the top three locations with the lowest concentrations were Kuwait, Phoenix (USA), and Las Vegas (USA; figure 1, appendix 2). Locations situated close to the equator in the tropical region and within subtropical regions, such as those in South America, southeastern Asia, and South Africa, showed the highest maximum daily wildfire-related O₃ concentrations. Conversely, areas at high latitudes, including eastern Asia, northern America, and central, southern, and northern Europe, consistently reported the lowest concentrations. Among the 749 locations, 734 (98.0%) had an IQR of daily wildfire-related O₃ concentration of less than 3 µg/m³ (figure 1). The peak months of daily

wildfire-related O₃ were January to May for locations in the northern hemisphere, and July to October for those in the southern hemisphere (appendix 1 p 9). Mean concentrations of wildfire-related O₃ in all locations are shown in appendix 1 (p 14) and appendix 2.

Across all locations, an increase of 1 µg/m³ in the mean daily concentration of wildfire-related O₃ during lag 0–2 days was associated with increases of 0.55% (95% CI 0.29 to 0.80) in daily all-cause mortality, 0.44% (-0.10 to 0.99) in daily cardiovascular mortality, and 0.82% (0.18 to 1.47) in daily respiratory mortality. For O₃ from non-wildfire sources, the associated increases in mortality were 0.08% (0.07 to 0.10), 0.07% (0.04 to 0.10), and 0.09% (0.05 to 0.13) for the three causes, respectively. Estimates of the percentage change in daily mortality rates associated with wildfire-related O₃ showed substantial geographical heterogeneity at the country or area level. The country-specific estimates ranged from -5.04% (-9.71 to -0.13; for Kuwait) to 7.23% (-0.64 to 15.74; for Moldova) for all-cause mortality, from -5.82% (-15.52 to 4.99; for Kuwait) to 4.96% (-9.43 to 21.63; for Finland) for cardiovascular mortality, and from -9.87% (-19.10 to 0.42; for Panama) to 6.40% (4.49 to 8.35; for Finland) for respiratory mortality; table 1). For pooled results by regions, the highest estimates of percentage change in mortality were observed in northern Europe, eastern Asia, southeastern Asia, and northern America, and the lowest in western Asia and southern Europe (table 2). In addition, the highest estimates were in locations with a GDP per capita of \$20 000 or higher, whereas the lowest estimates were in locations with a GDP per capita of \$10 000–19 999 (table 2).

Based on the pooled associations of all locations, an estimated 31 606 (95% CI 17 038 to 46 027) excess all-cause deaths, 5249 (-1244 to 11 620) cardiovascular deaths, and 4657 (999 to 8206) respiratory deaths annually were attributable to short-term exposure to wildfire-related O₃ for lag 0–2 days, corresponding to annual excess mortality fractions of 0.58% (95% CI 0.31 to 0.85), 0.41% (-0.10 to 0.91), and 0.86% (0.18 to 1.51), respectively (figure 2). For O₃ from non-wildfire sources, the excess mortality fractions were 2.96% (2.40 to 3.52), 2.35% (1.33 to 3.36), and 3.10% (1.66 to 4.52) for the three causes, respectively. The country or area-specific results for short-term wildfire-related O₃ exposure showed substantial variations, with annual excess mortality fractions ranging from 0.27% (0.15 to 0.39; Taiwan) to 2.23% (1.21 to 3.32; Ecuador) for all-cause mortality, from 0.24% (-0.06 to 0.53; Kuwait) to 0.92% (-0.22 to 2.02; China) for cardiovascular mortality, and from 0.44% (0.09 to 0.78; Canada) to 2.14% (0.46 to 3.72; China) for respiratory mortality (figure 2). The highest excess mortality fractions were observed in southern Africa (ie, South Africa), South America, and locations with the lowest GDP levels (<\$10 000 per capita), whereas the lowest

See Online for appendix 2

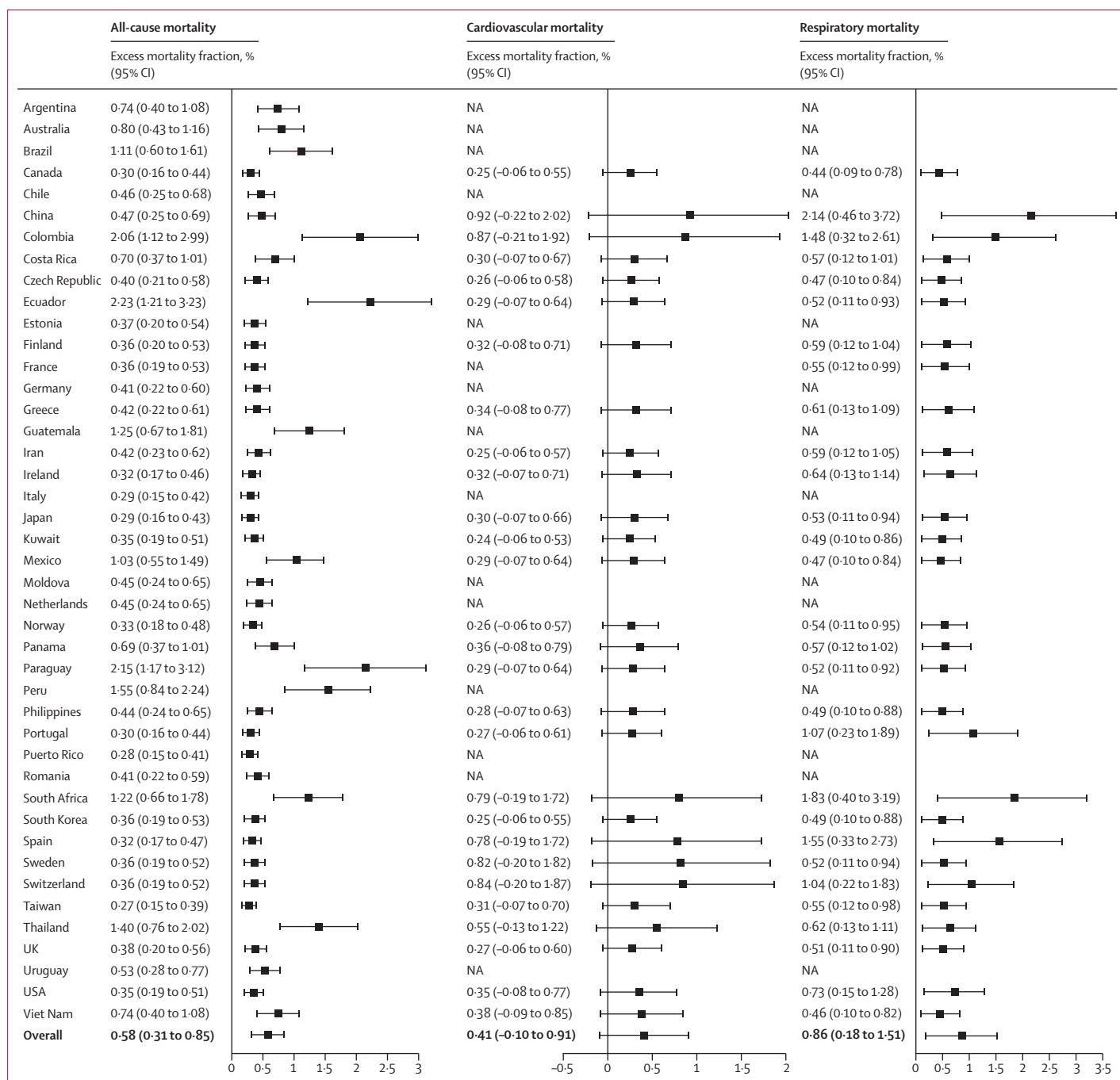


Figure 2: Annual excess mortality fractions due to exposure to wildfire-related O₃ for lag 0–2 days in 43 countries or areas
 Annual excess mortality fraction in each location was calculated using the pooled effect estimates and mean daily concentration of wildfire-related O₃ for lag 0–2 days. The sum of reported deaths was divided by the sum of excess deaths across all locations to derive the excess mortality fraction at the global level. O₃=ozone. NA=not available.

excess mortality fractions were observed in central and northern Europe, eastern and western Asia, northern America, and locations with high GDP levels (\geq \$20 000 GDP per capita; appendix 1 p 9). The corresponding numbers of excess annual deaths in different countries and regions and by GDP levels are shown in appendix 1 (pp 10–12).

Sensitivity analyses indicated that, in addition to controlling for time, temperature, and day of the week, controlling for wildfire-related PM_{2.5}, ambient O₃ from other sources, and PM_{2.5} from all sources did not significantly change the pooled estimates (figure 3), with the p values all greater than 0.1 for differences with the main model estimates (appendix 1 p 13). The pooled

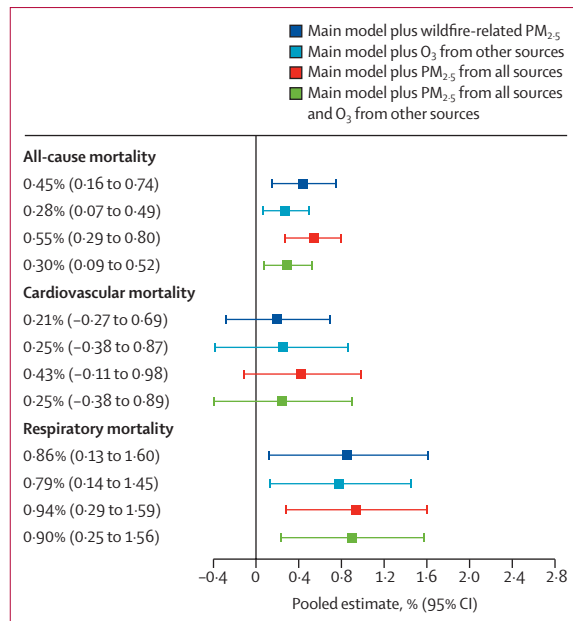


Figure 3: Pooled percentage change in mortality per 1 µg/m³ increase in wildfire-related O₃ during lag 0–2 days by controlling wildfire-related PM_{2.5}, O₃ from other sources, and PM_{2.5} from all sources

The main models adjusted for a time variable, ambient temperature, and day of the week at the first stage and included location as the random-effect term at the second stage. O₃=ozone.

effect estimates were robust to different degrees of freedom (3 to 6) for meteorological variables (temperature and relative humidity; appendix 1 p 13). Controlling for both ambient temperature and relative humidity did not significantly change the pooled effect estimates (appendix 1 p 15).

Discussion

Our study findings underscore the substantial impact of short-term exposure to O₃ from wildfire sources, which we found to be associated with increased all-cause and respiratory mortality. However, the association with cardiovascular mortality did not reach statistical significance. The estimated mortality burden attributable to wildfire-related O₃ exposure showed notable geographical disparities, which were particularly pronounced in South America and the country of South Africa, where wildfires have been frequent in recent years.¹ Our study, encompassing a large dataset spanning many geographical regions and diverse sociodemographic conditions, provides strong evidence of a link between excess mortality and O₃ pollution from wildfires.

Currently, evidence on the adverse health effects of wildfire-related O₃ is scarce, but some local studies have indicated its adverse health impacts. One study reported significantly increased risk of emergency hospital visits for asthma (relative risk per 10 µg/m³ increase in O₃ concentration: 1.050 [95% CI 1.022–1.078]) during active wildfire periods in northern California in 2008.¹⁴ One study in Victoria, Australia, during the 2002–03

bushfire season showed a significant association between O₃ pollution and increased hospital admissions (relative risk per IQR increase in O₃ concentration: 1.027 [95% CI 1.001–1.053]).³⁵ However, another study that examined the health impacts of long-distance O₃ transport in rural and remote areas of Portugal during fire seasons reported null results for the associations of O₃ peaks with hospital admissions for respiratory illnesses.³⁶

The oxidative stress caused by inhalation of O₃ is the most widely studied pathway on the health effects of O₃, which subsequently leads to respiratory cell injury and changed cell signalling.¹¹ Other pathways related to the respiratory effects of O₃ include the stimulation of neural reflexes, changes in epithelial barrier function, and immune disruption,^{37,38} among others. Currently, evidence for the cardiovascular effects of O₃ is insufficient and inconclusive. Experimental and epidemiological studies indicated that initiation of inflammation, increased vascular oxidative stress, altered heart rate, and decreased heart rate variability were all linked to exposure to O₃.^{39,40} However, epidemiological studies in the UK and USA reported no significant link between short-term O₃ exposure and cardiovascular hospital admission.^{41,42} A controlled human exposure research study also found no significant correlation between short-term O₃ exposure and changes in stroke volume or left ventricular ejection time.⁴³ In our study, the absence of a significant association between exposure to O₃ from wildfire sources and cardiovascular mortality might also be due to uncertainties in the pooled estimates, potentially caused by the cardiovascular mortality dataset including the least locations (appendix 1 pp 7–8). The pooled results across four economic levels highlight the potential impact of economic prosperity on wildfire-related health risks. Economically disadvantaged regions, such as southern Africa (ie, South Africa) and South America, showed the highest excess mortality fractions, whereas regions with higher GDP levels, such as central and northern Europe and northern America, showed the lowest excess mortality fractions. In addition to economic prosperity, this trend is influenced by regional wildfire frequency.

The health burden of wildfire-related O₃ might be largely underestimated. Existing studies have primarily focused on short-term health effects, and the long-term health effects and underlying biological mechanisms remain largely unknown.⁴⁴ Furthermore, evidence on the health effects of wildfire smoke is insufficient, with research limited to all-cause mortality effects and cardiovascular and respiratory effects. To address these critical evidence gaps, future research efforts should prioritise investigating the intricate relationship between wildfire smoke and various health outcomes. This prioritisation is particularly vital in vulnerable populations, including children, older people, patients with comorbidities, outdoor workers, and racial or ethnic minority subpopulations. Additionally, a comprehensive understanding of the interaction effects between wildfire smoke and other environmental factors,

such as high ambient temperature, is paramount.¹⁰ Such insights are likely to be crucial in informing the development of effective public health interventions aimed at mitigating the adverse health effects associated with wildfire-related O₃ exposure.

Wildfire smoke poses acute respiratory risks due to its high concentration of particulate matter and volatile organic compounds, whereas O₃ contributes to cardiovascular events and exacerbates respiratory illnesses, often synergistically amplifying health effects when combined with other pollutants.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, the psychological stress induced by wildfires can exacerbate mental health issues, potentially affecting a wide population range.⁴⁶ Understanding all of these impacts is crucial for developing targeted public health interventions aimed at mitigating the diverse health risks associated with wildfires. In particular, the adverse effects of wildfire-related O₃ to public health should be of high concern. Although wildfires only occur in specific locations worldwide, O₃ generated during wildfires can extend as far as 1000 km, and most personal actions (eg, wearing a face mask) cannot help to reduce individual exposure.¹⁰ Furthermore, amplified health effects of wildfire particulate matter has been observed with exposure to both O₃ and high temperature during fire seasons.⁴⁷ To minimise O₃ exposure during wildfires, comprehensive risk management strategies are essential, and should use exposure estimates and health data to guide interventions. Coordinated efforts need to be made alongside fuel and smoke management initiatives.⁴⁸ Government agencies and communities should be equipped with wildfire forecasting tools and tailored prevention strategies to mitigate O₃-related health risks effectively. Integrating O₃ reduction measures with existing strategies to limit smoke exposure ensures a holistic approach to safeguarding public health during wildfire events.

To our knowledge, this study is the first to systematically evaluate the associations between wildfire-related O₃ exposure and daily mortality across various locations and populations globally. The spatial and temporal characteristics of wildfire smoke can be accurately captured by exposure assessment with the GEOS-Chem model.⁴⁹ Furthermore, many studies have assessed the short-term health effects of air pollution via a two-stage analytic approach.^{17,50} In the first stage, both the conventional exposure–response association and the additional lag response association are defined in the distributed lag model.¹⁷ In the second stage, random-effects meta-analysis evaluates variability in effect estimates both within and between cities.⁵¹ Via meta-analysis, we obtained more robust and plausible results than from individual studies conducted in one city. In addition, this study considered cardiovascular and respiratory effects of wildfire-related O₃, which can facilitate the calculation of overall attributable burden.

Some limitations with our study need to be noted. Although this study has considered various populations

and regions, the pooled mortality risk cannot be interpreted as representative at the global level, as the study locations are not evenly distributed in each continent (eg, many more locations in the Americas than Africa) and most of them were from urban areas.¹⁷ With use of the GEOS-Chem model and various spatiotemporal predictors, we were able to estimate the concentration of wildfire-related O₃ in each location, but there were predictive errors ($R^2=80\%$ for GEOS-Chem-derived daily O₃ concentrations from all sources). Although this value indicates high predictive ability of the GEOS-Chem model in capturing wildfire-related O₃, there remains capacity for improvement in future iterations. Enhancements in predictive accuracy can be achieved by collecting more individual-level data (eg, age and gender) and location-specific data (eg, vegetation type and topographical features) on predictors, thereby refining exposure assessment methods. As a further limitation, this study only used time series mortality data. With individual-level information on participants (eg, sex, age, and behavioural factors), researchers could pinpoint vulnerable populations more accurately than in the current analysis, enabling targeted interventions and resource allocation to mitigate the health effects of wildfires effectively.

Based on multicountry exposure assessment, our study highlights the excess of all-cause and respiratory deaths linked to short-term O₃ exposure from wildfires. Urgent action is required from policy makers and public health experts to implement effective risk management strategies amid the escalating wildfire frequency and intensity driven by climate change. These strategies should include establishing early warning systems and robust disease prevention approaches. Our findings emphasise the need to integrate wildfire-related O₃ exposure into ongoing fire smoke research and smoke prevention activities, to guide the development of comprehensive strategies for mitigating the adverse health effects of wildfires.

Multi-Country Multi-City (MCC) Collaborative Research Network

Argentina Rosana Abrutzky (Universidad de Buenos Aires, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Buenos Aires). *Brazil* Micheline de Sousa Zanotti Stagliorio Coelho (Department of Pathology, Faculty of Medicine, University of São Paulo, São Paulo), Samuel David Osorio Garcia (Department of Environmental Health, University of São Paulo, São Paulo). *Chile* Patricia Matus Correa (Department of Public Health, Universidad de los Andes, Santiago), Nicolás Valdés Ortega (Centro Interdisciplinario de Cambio Global, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago). *Czech Republic* Jan Kyselý (Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Czech University of Life Sciences, Prague). *Estonia* Hans Orru (Institute of Family Medicine and Public Health, University of Tartu, Tartu), Marek Maasikmets (Estonian Environmental Research Centre, Tallinn). *Finland* Niilo R I Rytty (Center for Environmental and Respiratory Health Research, University of Oulu, Oulu). *France* Mathilde Pascal (Santé Publique France, Department of Environmental and Occupational Health, French National Public Health Agency, Saint Maurice). *Germany* Alexandra Schneider, Susanne Breitner (Institute of Epidemiology, Helmholtz Zentrum München – German Research Center for Environmental Health, Neuherberg). *Greece* Klea Katsouyanni, Evangelia Samoli (Department of Hygiene, Epidemiology and Medical Statistics, Medical School, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Athens). *Iran* Fatemeh Mayvaneh, Alireza Entezari (Faculty of Geography and Environmental Sciences,

Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar). *Ireland* Patrick Goodman (Technological University Dublin, Dublin). *Italy* Francesca de' Donato, Massimo Stafoggia (Department of Epidemiology, Lazio Regional Health Service, ASL Roma 1, Rome). *Japan* Xerxes Seposo (Department of Hygiene, Graduate School of Medicine, Hokkaido University, Sapporo), Masahiro Hashizume (Department of Global Health Policy, Graduate School of Medicine, The University of Tokyo), Yasushi Honda (Center for Climate Change Adaptation, National Institute for Environmental Studies, Tsukuba). *Mexico* Magali Hurtado-Díaz, César De la Cruz Valencia (Department of Environmental Health, National Institute of Public Health, Cuernavaca, Morelos). *Moldova* Ala Overcenco (National Agency for Public Health of the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection, Chişinău). *Netherlands* Caroline Ameling, Danny Houthuijs (National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, Centre for Sustainability and Environmental Health, Bilthoven). *Norway* Shilpa Rao (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, Oslo). *Peru* Gabriel Carrasco-Escobar (Health Innovation Laboratory, Institute of Tropical Medicine "Alexander von Humboldt", Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Lima). *Portugal* Joana Madureira (Environmental Health Department, Instituto Nacional de Saúde Dr Ricardo Jorge, Porto), Baltazar Nunes (Department of Epidemiology, Instituto Nacional de Saúde Dr Ricardo Jorge, Lisboa). *Romania* Iulian-Horia Holobaca (Faculty of Geography, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca). *South Africa* Rebecca M Garland (Department of Geography, Geoinformatics and Meteorology, University of Pretoria). *South Korea* Ho Kim (Graduate School of Public Health, Seoul National University, Seoul), Whanhee Lee (School of Biomedical Convergence Engineering, College of Information and Biomedical Engineering, Pusan National University, Yangsan). *Spain* Carmen Iñiguez (Department of Statistics and Computational Research, Universitat de València, València). *Sweden* Christofer Åström (Department of Public Health and Clinical Medicine, Umeå University, Umeå). *Switzerland* Martina S Ragetti (Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, Allschwil). *Taiwan* Yue Leon Guo (Environmental and Occupational Medicine, National Taiwan University [NTU] College of Medicine and NTU Hospital, Taipei), Shih-Chun Pan (National Institute of Environmental Health Science, National Health Research Institutes, Zhunan). *UK* Ariana Zeka (Institute for Global Health, University College London, London). *USA* Barrak Alahmad, Antonella Zanobetti (Department of Environmental Health, Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health, Harvard University, Boston, MA), Noah Scovronick (Department of Environmental Health, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA). *Uruguay* Valentina Colistro (Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, School of Medicine, Universidad de la República, Montevideo). *Viet Nam* Tran Ngoc Dang, Do Van Dung (Department of Environmental Health, Faculty of Public Health, University of Medicine and Pharmacy at Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City).

Contributors

YG and SL conceived and designed the study. GC did statistical analyses and wrote the manuscript. XY helped with the exposure assessment of wildfire-related ozone. Other coauthors collected the data for each country and reviewed the manuscript. YG, SL and GC have accessed and verified the data. All authors had full access to all the data in the study and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication.

Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

Data sharing

Data used in this study were collected by collaborators within the MCC Network under a data sharing agreement (<http://mccstudy.lshtm.ac.uk/>). The data cannot be made available publicly. Researchers can contact the corresponding authors (Yuming Guo, yuming.guo@monash.edu; and Shanshan Li, shanshan.li@monash.edu) for information on accessing the data used for this study and for the R code.

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