# Dieselgate emissions linked to 16,000 UK deaths and soaring childhood asthma cases



A recent analysis has significantly highlighted the grim legacy of the Dieselgate scandal, estimating that illegal emissions from diesel vehicles in the UK have led to around 16,000 premature deaths and 30,000 cases of childhood asthma. This assessment reveals a staggering economic toll, with excess diesel emissions reportedly costing the UK £96 billion in health and economic impacts, in addition to causing approximately 800,000 days lost to sickness. With lingering concerns about air quality, experts warn that without urgent and stringent regulatory actions, the UK risks an additional 6,000 early deaths in the coming years.

The assessment, presented by Jamie Kelly from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, underscores the alarming public health implications tied to diesel emissions. Kelly stated, “Our calculations reveal the widespread and devastating health impacts of excessive diesel emissions – thousands of lives cut short, countless children developing asthma, and an immense burden of chronic illness.” The ongoing crisis is exacerbated by the UK government's sluggish response compared to counterparts in the U.S., where substantial fines and mandatory recalls have been enacted since the scandal broke.

While investigations into diesel emissions began only in 2024, nearly two million consumers have resorted to legal avenues against 18 automobile manufacturers, creating a growing tide of accountability efforts. The UK’s failure to act decisively has left toxic vehicles on the roads, exposing urban populations, particularly children, to harmful pollutants that contribute significantly to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.

Recent commentary from prominent doctors and scientists further advocates for ambitious policies aimed at reducing air pollution levels, arguing that city-wide initiatives like London's Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) are vital. They contend that these schemes are essential in combating the "unacceptably high" rates of child illness and mortality linked to polluted air. Despite political pushback, the consensus among health experts is clear: without enhanced regulatory frameworks, the health of future generations remains jeopardised.

Over the years, evidence has consistently indicated a strong connection between vehicle pollution and rising asthma cases among children. Notably, nitrogen dioxide emissions, primarily from diesel engines, contribute heavily to the incidence of childhood asthma, accounting for 19% of cases in the UK. This percentage rises sharply in urban areas—reaching as high as 29% in London and 23% in Manchester. The critical health risks associated with these emissions necessitate immediate action to safeguard children's well-being and protect vulnerable populations from chronic illnesses.

Moreover, a recent report from Asthma + Lung UK indicates the substantial economic benefits of implementing cleaner air policies. It estimates that such initiatives could save lives and avert countless school days lost due to pollution-related sickness, thereby reducing the £2.3 billion annual costs of air pollution from road transport—a figure projected to escalate to £5.3 billion by 2035. This highlights a dual imperative for reform: protecting public health while also alleviating the financial strain on the healthcare system.

In a broader context, the detrimental effects of diesel pollution extend beyond immediate health ramifications. A study published by the European Respiratory Society has outlined the extensive societal and healthcare costs associated with asthma, revealing a burden that amounted to £0.21 billion in greenhouse gas emissions in 2022 alone, with projections forecasting a staggering £1.2 billion over the next decade. This insight further underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address environmental factors contributing to health issues.

As the UK grapples with the fallout from Dieselgate, the call for decisive action grows louder. The health of a nation, particularly its children, hinges on the response to this ongoing public health crisis. Without a commitment to cleaner transportation and stricter regulations, the legacy of diesel pollution will continue to cast a long shadow over societal health and economic stability.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.ehn.org/dieselgate-linked-vehicle-pollution-blamed-for-thousands-of-uk-deaths-and-child-asthma-cases)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.ehn.org/dieselgate-linked-vehicle-pollution-blamed-for-thousands-of-uk-deaths-and-child-asthma-cases), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/28/ulez-key-to-tackling-unacceptably-high-child-illness-and-death-doctors-say)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/10/vehicle-pollution-results-in-4m-child-asthma-cases-a-year), [[5]](https://publications.ersnet.org/content/erjor/10/4/00577-2023)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/saving-your-breath-economic-benefit-cleaner-air)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/10/vehicle-pollution-results-in-4m-child-asthma-cases-a-year), [[6]](https://www.the-independent.com/news/health/child-asthma-air-pollution-uk-nitrogen-dioxide-children-lancet-a8865016.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[5]](https://publications.ersnet.org/content/erjor/10/4/00577-2023)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ehn.org/dieselgate-linked-vehicle-pollution-blamed-for-thousands-of-uk-deaths-and-child-asthma-cases> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jul/28/ulez-key-to-tackling-unacceptably-high-child-illness-and-death-doctors-say> - Leading doctors and scientists have urged politicians to maintain and expand city-wide schemes aimed at reducing traffic pollution levels, which are linked to thousands of deaths annually. They emphasised that initiatives like London's Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) are crucial in addressing 'unacceptably high' levels of illness and child deaths caused by air pollution. Despite political opposition, experts advocate for more ambitious policies to mitigate toxic air exposure, highlighting the significant health risks associated with current pollution levels.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/apr/10/vehicle-pollution-results-in-4m-child-asthma-cases-a-year> - A global study has found that vehicle pollution contributes to approximately 4 million new cases of childhood asthma each year. Nitrogen dioxide, primarily emitted by diesel vehicles, is a significant factor in this increase. The research indicates that in the UK, nitrogen dioxide accounts for 19% of new childhood asthma cases, with higher percentages in cities like Manchester (23%) and London (29%). The study underscores the urgent need for cleaner transportation to protect children's health.
4. <https://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/saving-your-breath-economic-benefit-cleaner-air> - Asthma + Lung UK, in collaboration with environmental consultants, has released a report highlighting the economic benefits of cleaner air policies. The report suggests that implementing such policies across England could save lives, reduce asthma cases, and prevent thousands of school days lost to sickness caused by air pollution. It estimates that the combined costs of air pollution from road transport amount to £2.3 billion as of March 2023, potentially rising to £5.3 billion by 2035.
5. <https://publications.ersnet.org/content/erjor/10/4/00577-2023> - A study published by the European Respiratory Society assessed the environmental, healthcare, and societal impacts of asthma in the UK. The research estimated that greenhouse gas emissions associated with asthma activities amounted to £0.21 billion in 2022, with a projected total of £1.2 billion over the period from 2022 to 2031. The study highlights the significant economic burden of asthma on the UK's healthcare system and the importance of addressing environmental factors contributing to the condition.
6. <https://www.the-independent.com/news/health/child-asthma-air-pollution-uk-nitrogen-dioxide-children-lancet-a8865016.html> - Research indicates that nitrogen dioxide pollution is a substantial risk factor for childhood asthma incidence in both developed and developing countries, especially in urban areas. The study found that in the UK, nitrogen dioxide accounts for 19% of new childhood asthma cases, with higher percentages in cities like Manchester (23%) and London (29%). The findings suggest that the World Health Organization's guidelines for annual average nitrogen dioxide concentrations may need to be revisited to better protect children's health.
7. <https://energyandcleanair.org/publication/the-toll-of-fossil-fuel-air-pollution-a-case-for-clean-transportation/> - A report by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air highlights the severe health and economic impacts of diesel truck emissions globally. The study reveals that emissions from trucks produced by four major manufacturers have been linked to 307,000 deaths and more than USD 1.4 trillion in global health costs. The report underscores the urgent need for truck electrification and cleaner transportation policies to mitigate these adverse effects.