**The unseen threats to our health – Environmental toxins and pollution**

**Johannesburg - Imagine waking up daily in a world where the air you breathe, the water you drink, and the soil beneath your feet slowly poison you. It may sound like a dystopian nightmare, but for many people around the globe, this is a stark reality. Environmental toxins and pollution are pervasive, and they have profound effects on our health. Environmental toxins are hazardous substances in the air, water, soil, and even our homes and workplaces. Pollution exacerbates the presence of these toxins, contaminating the environment and increasing the risk of exposure.**

**The air we breathe**

Air pollution is a significant environmental health risk caused mainly by vehicle emissions, industrial processes, power generation, and residential heating. Air pollutants can cause respiratory diseases like asthma and bronchitis and increase the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular problems. Certain air pollutants, like benzene and formaldehyde, are known carcinogens, increasing the risk of lung cancer. Air pollution may also affect brain health, potentially leading to cognitive decline, developmental delays, and an increased risk of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's disease.

**The water we drink**

Water pollution, caused by industrial discharges, agricultural runoff, sewage, and improper chemical disposal, can lead to health issues such as gastrointestinal diseases like cholera, dysentery, and gastroenteritis. Heavy metals and chemicals can leach into water sources, causing long-term health issues like kidney damage, neurological disorders, and developmental problems in children. Endocrine disruptors in polluted water can interfere with hormonal functions, affecting reproductive health and developmental issues in fetuses and children.

The Vaal River, a significant water source in South Africa, has faced [severe pollution challenges](https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2022-01-04-no-end-in-sight-to-vaal-river-sewage-problem-environmental-group-says/) in recent years. Industrial waste, sewage leaks, and agricultural runoff have contaminated the river, affecting the communities' health. Residents have reported increased cases of gastrointestinal diseases, skin rashes, and other health problems. The Vaal River crisis requires stringent water quality regulations and effective pollution control measures.

**The soil beneath our feet**

Soil pollution, often overlooked but dangerous, is caused by industrial activities, agricultural practices, and improper waste disposal. It can lead to food contamination, causing chronic illnesses and developmental issues in humans and animals. Direct contact risks occur when people working with contaminated soil absorb toxins through their skin or inhale contaminated dust. Groundwater contamination occurs when pollutants leach into groundwater, affecting drinking water supplies and causing health issues. Overall, soil pollution poses significant health risks.

Some of South Africa's old mines, which were inappropriately closed, may pose a health risk due to elevated levels of toxic elements in the surrounding areas. A study analysed soil from the [Edendale lead mine](https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2225-62532019000100009) property in Mamelodi Extension 11, which was suspected to be contaminated with lead. The soil was screened for zinc and lead using a field-portable X-ray fluorescence spectrometer, and the results showed three anomalies with high concentrations, possibly due to more dumping or waste from the old mine. This type of pollution can pose severe health risks to residents. High blood lead levels often lead to cognitive impairments, developmental delays, and other health issues, especially in children.

**The hidden dangers at home**

Indoor pollution is a significant concern, as everyday products and activities can introduce toxins into homes, affecting air quality and health. Common indoor toxins include pesticides, gasoline, fuels, mould, and asbestosis, which can cause respiratory irritation, asthma, headaches, and long-term health issues.

In South Africa, many older buildings contain asbestos materials. As these buildings age and deteriorate, asbestos fibres can be released into the air, posing a significant health risk. There have been numerous cases of mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases among residents and workers exposed to asbestos in these environments.

**Practical steps and solutions to protect your health**

Medshield Medical Scheme provides members with comprehensive health screenings to identify potential issues early, allowing timely intervention. We also offer specialist consultations for severe health conditions linked to environmental toxins, including pulmonologists, cardiologists, and oncologists, offering advanced diagnostic and treatment options. Medshield emphasises preventive care and wellness but do have chronic disease management programmes and benefits for asthma or cardiovascular diseases available. In cases of acute poisoning or severe exposure, Medshield ensures access to emergency medical services, as well as mental health support services, to help members cope with stress and anxiety related to environmental health concerns.

While Medshield provides robust support, there are steps individuals can take to reduce their exposure to environmental toxins:

* **Stay informed:** Stay updated with local environmental reports and understand the potential risks in your area.
* **Use water filters:** Use appropriate filtration systems to ensure your drinking water is contaminant-free.
* **Choose clean products:** Use eco-friendly and non-toxic household and personal care products.
* **Improve indoor air quality:** Use air purifiers, avoid smoking indoors, and ensure proper ventilation in your home.
* **Advocate for clean environments:** Support policies and initiatives to reduce pollution and promote environmental health.

As consumers, we can safeguard ourselves by limiting our exposure to environmental toxins where possible, and we can ensure that we have a trustworthy healthcare partner on hand that will cover the healthcare costs if we are exposed. Act today to safeguard your health and the health of your family.

**FIN**

(847 words)

**EDITORS NOTES**

**FURTHER MEDIA INFORMATION AND INTERVIEW REQUESTS**

* Stone issues this release on behalf of the Medshield Medical Scheme.
* For media enquiries or interview requests, please contact Willem Eksteen, CEO of Stone or a media liaison member of the Stone team at media@stone.consulting / 011 447 0168
* Alternatively, contact Lilané Swanepoel at Medshield at 010 597 4982 / lilanes@medshield.co.za

**MORE INFORMATION ON THE 2024 MEDSHIELD BENEFIT OPTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

Benefits and Contribution amendments are subject to CMS approval.

Please refer to the 2024 Product Page on the Medshield website at <https://medshield.co.za/>. You can review the benefit adjustments and value adds and download the 2024 benefit guides

* **PremiumPlus** provides mature families and professionals with unlimited hospital cover in a hospital of their choice, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at 200% Medshield Private Tariff, and the freedom to manage daily healthcare expenses through a comprehensive Personal Savings Account and extended Above Threshold Cover.
* **MediBonus** provides mature families and professionals with unlimited hospital cover in a hospital of their choice, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at 200% Medshield Private Tariff, and the independence to manage daily healthcare expenses through a substantial Day-to-Day Limit.
* **MediSaver** is perfect for independent individuals and young professionals thinking about expanding their families. MediSaver offers unlimited hospital cover in the Compact Hospital Network, with the freedom to manage daily healthcare expenses through a generous Personal Savings Account.
* **MediPlus** provides middle to upper-income families with complete healthcare cover for major medical and daily healthcare needs. Unlimited hospital cover is provided through a choice of two hospital networks, Prime or the value-focused Compact Hospital Network. Daily healthcare expenses are covered through a generous Day-to-Day Limit. Benefits are identical in both categories, Prime and Compact, with care coordination and doctor referral mandated on MediPlus Compact.
* **MediCore** is ideal for healthy individuals looking for comprehensive hospital cover, with daily healthcare expenses self-managed. This option offers unlimited hospital cover in the Compact Hospital Network, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at Medshield Private Tariff 200%. Day-to-day healthcare expenses are self-funded.
* **MediValue - Prime and Compact** - is the ideal option for growing families. It offers affordable cover for major medical and daily healthcare needs. Unlimited hospital cover is provided through a choice of two hospital networks, Prime or the value-focused Compact Hospital Network. Daily healthcare expenses are covered through a sizeable Day-to-Day Limit. Benefits are identical on both options, MediValue Prime and MediValue Compact, with care coordination and doctor referral mandated on MediValue Compact.
* **MediSwift** is the ideal hospital plan for active, healthy individuals. Major medical emergency and In-Hospital treatment are covered up to R1 million per family in the Compact Hospital Network, with the added benefit of day-to-day treatment for non-professional sports injuries. As a hospital plan, MediSwift offers no Day-to-Day benefits, allowing members the freedom to self-manage their daily healthcare expenses.

**Medshield Medical Scheme - Live Assured knowing you have a Partner for Life.**

**ABOUT MEDSHIELD MEDICAL SCHEME**

* Medshield is a healthcare fund where all members contribute towards the fund monthly to cater for medical cover should the need arise.
* Medshield has been in operation since 1968, making us one of the most experienced, knowledgeable, and reliable medical schemes in South Africa. Our extensive experience in the healthcare sector guides our understanding of our members' needs. Our excellent cover and benefits combined with the best quality systems and services have resulted in our exceptional size and strength.
* Each of our options offers affordably priced benefits. We continuously review and improve the range of benefits in each option to bring you what you need.
* Our impeccable reputation of prompt payments to hospitals, doctors, pharmacies and other medical caregivers guarantees approval from service providers when you present your Medshield membership card.
* Our extensive partner networks place us in the perfect position to offer exceptionally competitive rates to our members.
* Medshield is well-represented throughout all nine provinces and provides seamless access to service providers in your area. Our geographical spread provides convenience if it becomes necessary for you to have a personal discussion with one of our experienced consultants. We also have a streamlined online claim submission system and immediate contact centre assistance, making it easier to manage your membership and claims from the convenience of your home or office.
* Our extensive range of additional benefits and services is another distinguishing factor. Our benefits and services have been designed to give members additional support when they need it most, for instance, in an emergency or when suffering from a chronic or life-threatening condition.
* Compared with other medical schemes, our trustworthiness, impeccable history, and exceptional service guarantee that we come out tops!