



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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The environment plays an important role in human development and health. Researchers have found an association between specific diseases and other health effects to exposures to environmental hazards (for example, lung cancer and exposure to asbestos, and mental retardation and exposure to lead). Other associations between environmental exposures and health effects are suspected, but research has not been able to provide conclusive results (for example, the association between bladder cancer and exposure to disinfectant byproducts). Currently, few systems exist at the state or national level to concurrently track many of the exposures and health effects that might be associated with environmental hazards. Bridging this gap between health and environmental information systems will provide better quality data for researchers.

Since 2002, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) has led a nationwide effort to establish a National Environmental Public Health Tracking (EPHT) Network. This network will enable researchers to collect, integrate, analyze, interpret, maintain, and disseminate data on environmental hazards, human exposure to those hazards, and potential environmentally related diseases. Congress initiated funding for this program because it recognized that the nation lacked critical data that could document possible links between environmental hazards and noninfectious diseases or other health effects.

The mission of EPHT is to improve the health of communities. Information from an EPHT network will help federal, state, and local agencies be better prepared to develop and evaluate effective public health actions to prevent or control diseases or other disabilities that are linked to hazards in the environment. In addition, health care providers will be able to provide better care and targeted preventive services, and the public will have a better understanding of what is happening in their communities and what actions they can take to protect or improve their health.

Health and Environment Linked for Information Exchange, Atlanta (HELIX-Atlanta) is an effort to build an EPHT network in five Metropolitan Atlanta counties (Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Fulton, and Gwinnett counties). The following activities are examples of how information from the HELIX-Atlanta Network could be used:

- a. Evaluate effectiveness of environmental public health interventions
- b. Facilitate environmental public health decision making
- c. Monitor and detect changes in selected environmental public health events
- d. Develop environmental public health hypotheses for research

HELIX-Atlanta Network will be part of the National EPHT Network. Initially, HELIX-Atlanta activities will focus on methods development for preparing health- and environment-related data for integration into a local EPHT network. These activities will result in increased EPHT capacity in the five-county area and provide credible information to advance environmental public health practice and research.

