

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

Is the climate warming?

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ANSWER

Yes. Earth's average surface air temperature has increased by about 1°C since 1900, with over half of the increase occurring since the mid-1970s. A wide range of other observations (such as reduced Arctic sea ice and increased ocean heat content) and indications from the natural world (such as shifts of temperature-sensitive species of fish, mammals, insects towards the poles) together provide definite evidence of planetary-scale warming.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document *Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences*.

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

How do scientists know that recent climate change is largely caused by human activities?



ANSWER

Scientists know that recent climate change is largely caused by human activities from an understanding of basic physics. They have compared observations with models, and fingerprinted the detailed patterns of climate change caused by different human and natural influences.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

CO₂ is already in the atmosphere naturally, so why are emissions from human activity significant?





ANSWER

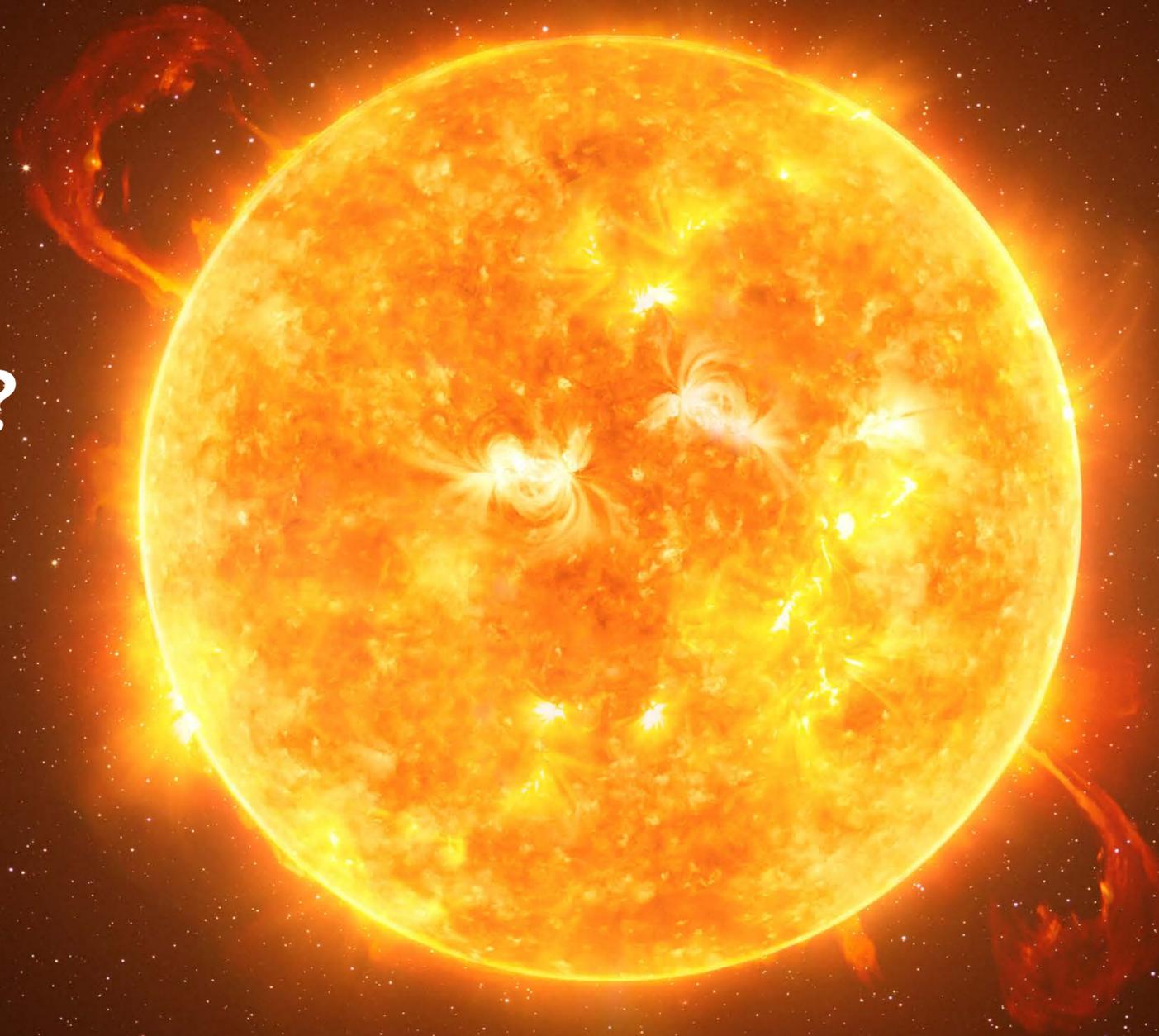
Humans have significantly disturbed the natural carbon cycle by extracting long-buried fossil fuels and burning them for energy. This has released CO₂ to the atmosphere, which traps heat acting as a blanket around the Earth.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document *Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences*.

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

What role has the Sun played in climate change in recent decades?





ANSWER

The Sun provides the primary source of energy driving Earth's climate system, but its variations have played very little role in the climate changes observed in recent decades. Direct satellite measurements since the late 1970s show no net increase in the Sun's output, while at the same time global surface temperatures have increased.

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What do you want to know about climate change?

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QUESTION

What do changes in the vertical structure of atmospheric temperature – from the surface up to the stratosphere – tell us about the causes of recent climate change?



ANSWER

The observed warming in the lower atmosphere and cooling in the upper atmosphere provide us with key insights into the underlying causes of climate change and reveal that natural factors alone cannot explain the observed changes.

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What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

Climate is always changing.
Why is climate change
of concern now?





ANSWER

All major climate changes, including natural ones, are disruptive. Past climate changes led to the extinction of many species, population migrations, and pronounced changes in the land surface and ocean circulation. The speed of the current climate change is faster than most of the past events, making it more difficult for human societies and the natural world to adapt.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document *Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences*.

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

Is the current level of atmospheric CO₂ concentration unprecedented in Earth's history?



Image: Hong Kong skyline, © CHUNYIP WONG.



ANSWER

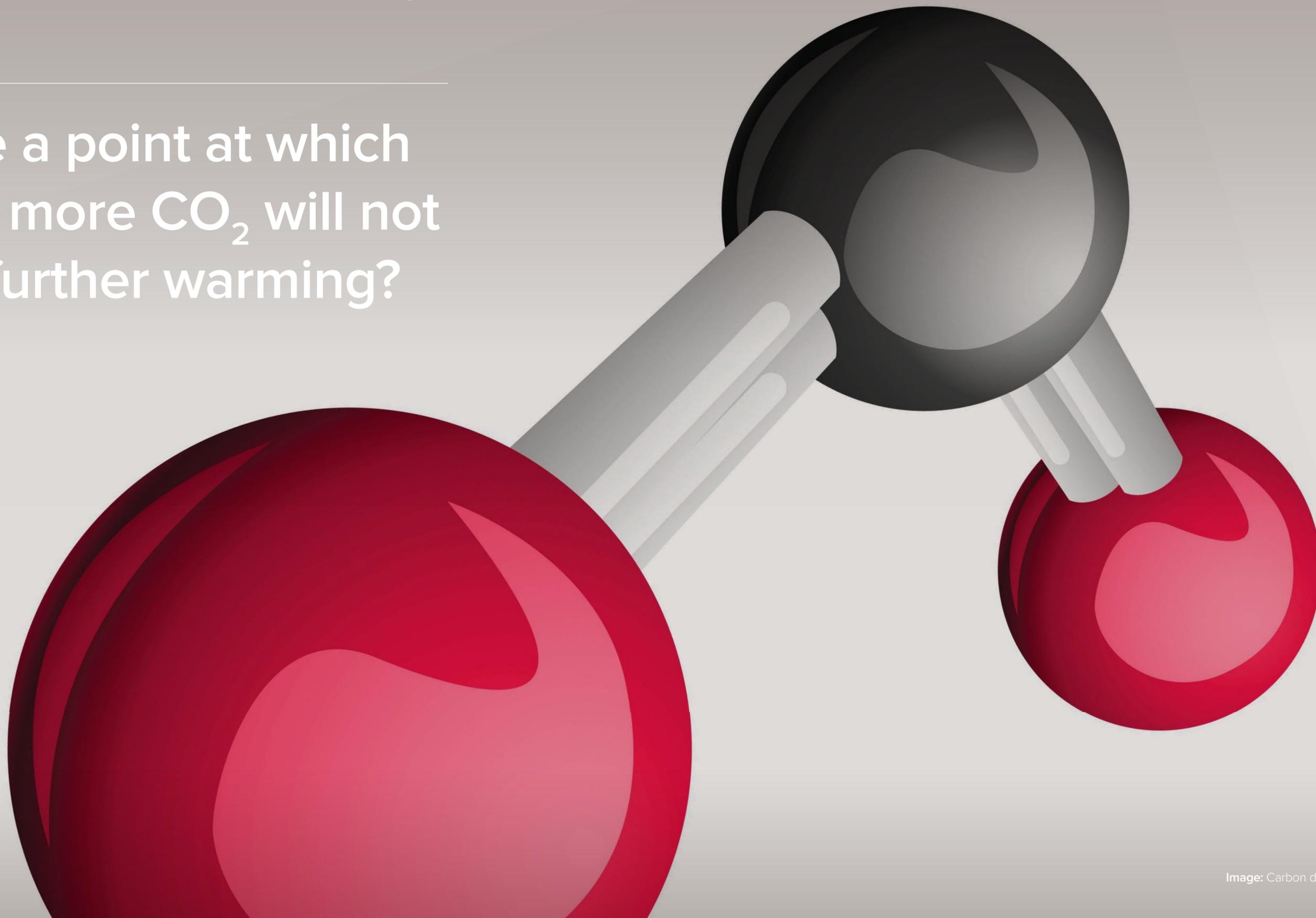
The present level of atmospheric CO₂ concentration is almost certainly unprecedented in the past million years, during which time modern humans evolved and societies developed. The atmospheric CO₂ concentration was, however, higher in Earth's more distant past (many millions of years ago), at which time paleoclimatic and geological data indicate that temperatures and sea levels were also higher than they are today.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

Is there a point at which adding more CO₂ will not cause further warming?





ANSWER

No. Adding more CO₂ to the atmosphere will cause surface temperatures to continue to increase. As the atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ increase, the addition of extra CO₂ becomes progressively less effective at trapping Earth's energy, but surface temperature will still rise.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document *Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences*.

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

Does the rate of warming vary from one decade to another?



ANSWER

Yes. The observed warming rate has varied from year to year, decade to decade, and place to place, as is expected from our understanding of the climate system. These shorter-term variations are mostly due to natural causes, and do not contradict our fundamental understanding that the long-term warming trend is primarily due to human-induced changes in the atmospheric levels of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

QUESTION

Did the slowdown of warming during the 2000s to early 2010s mean that climate change is no longer happening?

ANSWER

No. After a very warm year in 1998 that followed the strong 1997 – 1998 El Niño, the increase in average surface temperature slowed relative to the previous decade of rapid temperature increases.

Despite the slower rate of warming, the 2000s were warmer than the 1990s. The limited period of slower warming ended with a dramatic jump to warmer temperatures between 2014 and 2015. A short-term slowdown in the warming of Earth's surface does not invalidate our understanding of long-term changes in global temperature arising from changes in greenhouse gases caused by human activity.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

If the world is warming,
why are some winters and
summers still very cold?





ANSWER

Global warming is a long-term trend, but that does not mean that every year will be warmer than the previous one. Day to day and year to year changes in weather patterns will continue to produce some unusually cold days and nights and winters and summers, even as the climate warms.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document *Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences*.

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

Why is Arctic sea ice decreasing while Antarctic sea ice has changed little?





ANSWER

Sea ice extent is affected by winds and ocean currents as well as temperature. Sea ice in the partly-enclosed Arctic Ocean seems to be responding directly to warming, while changes in winds and in the ocean seem to be dominating the patterns of climate and sea ice change in the ocean around Antarctica.

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What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

How does climate change affect the strength and frequency of floods, droughts, hurricanes and tornadoes?





ANSWER

Earth's lower atmosphere is becoming warmer and moister as a result of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. This gives the potential for more energy for storms and certain extreme weather events. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the types of events most closely related to temperature, such as heatwaves and extremely hot days, are becoming more likely. Heavy rainfall and snowfall events (which increase the risk of flooding) are also generally becoming more frequent.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

How fast is sea level rising?



ANSWER

Long-term measurements of tide gauges and recent satellite data show that global sea level is rising, with the best estimate of the rate of global-average rise over the last decade being 3.6mm per year. The rate of sea level rise has increased since satellite measurements began in 1992; the dominant factor in global-average sea level rise since 1970 is human-caused warming. The overall observed rise since 1902 is about 16cm.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

What is ocean acidification and why does it matter?

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ANSWER

Direct observations of ocean chemistry have shown that the chemical balance of seawater has shifted to a more acidic state (lower pH). Some marine organisms (such as corals and some shellfish) have shells composed of calcium carbonate, which dissolves more readily in acid. As the acidity of seawater increases, it becomes more difficult for these organisms to form or maintain their shells.

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What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

How confident are scientists that Earth will warm further over the coming century?

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ANSWER

Very confident. If emissions continue at their present rate, without efforts to reduce them through new technology or regulations, then warming of 2.6 to 4.8°C in addition to the warming already experienced would be expected during the 21st century.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document *Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences*.

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

Are climate changes of a few degrees a cause for concern?





ANSWER

Yes. Even though an increase of a few degrees in global average temperature does not sound like much, global average temperature during the last ice age was only about 4 to 5°C colder than now. Global warming of just a few degrees will be associated with widespread changes in regional and local temperature and precipitation as well as with increases in some types of extreme weather events. These and other changes (such as sea level rise and storm surge) will have serious impacts on human societies and the natural world.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

What are scientists doing to address key uncertainties in our understanding of the climate system?





ANSWER

Science is a continual process of observation, understanding, modelling, testing and prediction. The prediction of a long-term trend in global warming from increasing greenhouse gases is robust and has been confirmed by a growing body of evidence. Nevertheless, understanding of certain aspects of climate change remains incomplete. Examples include natural climate variations on decadal-to-centennial timescales and regional-to-local spatial scales and cloud responses to climate change, which are all areas of active research.

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What do you want to know about climate change?

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QUESTION

Are disaster scenarios about tipping points like ‘turning off the Gulf Stream’ and release of methane from the Arctic a cause for concern?



ANSWER

Results from the best available climate models do not predict an abrupt change in (or collapse of) the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, which includes the Gulf Stream, in the near future. However, this and other potential high-risk abrupt changes (often referred to as tipping points), like the release of methane and CO₂ from thawing permafrost, remain active areas of scientific research. Some abrupt changes are already underway, such as the decrease in Arctic sea ice (see Question 12). As warming increases, the possibility of other major abrupt changes cannot be ruled out.

A more detailed answer can be found in the document [Climate change evidence and causes – an overview from the Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences](#).

What do you want to know about climate change?

QUESTION

If emissions of greenhouse gases were stopped, would the climate return to the conditions of 200 years ago?

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ANSWER

No. Even if emissions of greenhouse gases were to suddenly stop, Earth's surface temperature would require thousands of years to cool and return to the level in the pre-industrial era.