Last fall, the world marked a major milestone: According to the United Nations (UN), the number of people on Earth reached 7 billion - and counting.

It took from the dawn of humankind, some 50,000 years ago, until 1804 for the population to reach a billion. In 123 years it gained another billion - and yet another billion 32 years later. Some people alive today have seen the population triple in their lifetimes!

What caused the population explosion? Medical advances like vaccines, along with better nutrition, and sanitation have helped more children survive to adulthood. People are also living longer than ever before.

“If there are more births than deaths, the population grows,” says Gerhard Helig, who compiles demographic information, or statistics about the characteristics of populations, for the UN.

More people means more strain on the environment. Luckily, human population growth has slowed in the past 50 years. Why? “people, on average, are having fewer children than in the past.” Says Heilig. Despite that, numbers of people continue to rise. By the end of the century, the human population is projected to reach 10 billion.

As humanity grows, so do the challenges it faces. Many people still lack basic necessities, such as clean water and food. There also aren’t enough jobs or school for everyone. Tackling these problems is important for everyone’s future as earth becomes increasingly cramped

-Cody Crane
WHO ARE THE 7 BILLION?
If 100 people were chosen to represent the diversity of humans on the planet, they would have the following demographics. (These numbers translate into percentages that can be applied to the entire population.)

GENDER
51 men, 49 women

RELIGION
33 Christian, 22 Muslim, 14 Hindu, 7 Buddhist, 12 other, 12 non-religious

NATIVE LANGUAGE
12 Mandarin Chinese, 5 English, 5 Spanish, 3 Arabic, 3 Hindi, 72 other

AGE
27 are younger than 15, 65 are between ages 15 and 65, 8 are older than 65

EDUCATION
16 can’t read or write, 35 have Internet access

LOCALITY
51 live in cities, 49 live in rural areas

WHERE DO THE 7 BILLION LIVE?
Two out of every five people in the world currently live in China or India. But from now until the end of the century, the largest growth in the population is predicted to come from Africa—not Asia. “Africa alone will gain another 2.5 billion people by 2100,” predicts Gerhard Heilig of the UN.

YOUR ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINT
The average American’s ecological footprint (measure of a person’s impact on the environment) is nine times larger than that of a person in a developing country. If everyone consumed as many resources as Americans do, we’d need four more Earths to support us all.

FAMILY SIZE
Worldwide fertility rates have fallen to the current global average of 2.6 children per woman. Areas with higher fertility rates have a growing, younger population, while areas with lower fertility rates are experiencing a shrinking, aging population.

AFRICA
4.6 children per woman

NORTH AMERICA
2 children per woman

ASIA
2.3 children per woman

EUROPE
1.5 children per woman

POPULATION BOOM
This graph shows past and future billion-person milestones. When is the world’s population growth predicted to almost level off?