
Pollution, cancers get a second look

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Health researchers have found what they consider a suspicious pattern of lung cancer and an acute form of leukemia in working class Eugene neighborhoods near the train tracks and the J.H. Baxter creosoting plant.

The findings are a reversal from reassurances issued last fall by the government's Superfund Health Investigation and Education program, which said then there were no anomalies in the industrial neighborhoods.

Epidemiologists, environmental cleanup officials and air quality experts are scheduled to explain the new concerns at a meeting tonight at the Red Cross building in West Eugene.

"It's not a huge number of (disease) cases, but it's more than might be expected, and so we're going to take a good, thorough look at it," said Richard Leman, a doctor and epidemiologist with the state. "We're going to try to figure out as best we can what's going on."

The three-year cancer investigation encompassed 14,694 households in six census tracts, taking in much of the Bethel, River Road and Trainsong neighborhoods.

The news was bittersweet for some neighbors.

Carolyn Lodge has long believed that the rate of acute myelogenous leukemia was higher in her area. She stuck to her beliefs last fall, when the state released figures that contradicted her.

Lodge had suffered the leukemia since 2003, and she was keeping a list of neighbors or former neighbors who also contracted the disease.

She wasn't surprised Wednesday by the state's admission that the initial findings were based on older numbers and a math error.

"I was feeling kind of crazy like it must be in my mind - just because it happened to me, I'm seeing it everywhere," Lodge said. "(But) I'm not crazy and didn't lose all my brains to chemotherapy."

Researchers said they have found an elevated rate of AML in the census tract north of the Baxter plant, where neighbors had complained for nearly 15 years about acrid chemical smells wafting from the plant.

Four cases arose in the three years between 2002 and 2004, the investigation showed. The expected number in that time period for the census tract is less than one.

Epidemiologist Jae Douglas said the elevated rates don't necessarily link the cancers with exposure to industrial pollutants.

"When we talk about excess cancers, we're talking about a statistical distinction," she said. "We don't know if there's other explanations for why we're seeing these extra

cases."

Cancer experts will go back in coming months and look for other explanations, such as smoking by individuals, occupational exposures to chemicals, and previous treatments with chemotherapy, which has a strong connection with that form of leukemia.

They'll interview patients and comb through medical records.

Such cancer cluster investigations rarely establish a link between cancers and specific chemicals, Leman said. "It's often a difficult thing to say 'Oh definitely, this is what caused these cancers.'"

But they think it is worthwhile to look.

The second elevated rate the researchers found was in lung cancer in the census tract in the neighborhood west of the Union Pacific Railroad yard. Investigators found 29 cases in an area expected to have only 11.

The pattern was apparent last fall, but researchers missed it because they made a math mistake when performing calculations to determine significance.

Neighborhood activist Becky Riley wants the state to keep probing. "It certainly warrants further investigation, and I hope we'll get that out of the state," she said.

Investigators already determined that in all but one of the lung cancer cases, the person died of a tobacco-related illness, and it said so on their death certificates. Tobacco is implicated in 80 percent of all lung cancer deaths. The neighborhood could have a higher-than-average smoking rate.

The researchers say it's too early to advise residents about what, if anything, they can do to protect themselves from the diseases.

Preliminary 2005 cancer rates should be available in about a month, and that will give researchers a hint about whether the elevated cancer rates will continue. More information will emerge about the people who've developed the cancers and what connection the disease has to the neighborhood. In the meantime, neighbors will have to cope with the ambiguity, Douglas said.

"If they're not comfortable waiting for us to get more information - and understand what the data are really telling us - they may choose to leave" the neighborhood, she said.

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Air pollution in the West Eugene industrial belt and the cancer rates in nearby neighborhoods are on the agenda at a public meeting arranged by the Oregon Department of Human Services.

When and where: 6 tonight at the Red Cross, 862 Bethel Drive.

Schedule:

In the first hour, health, air quality and environmental officials will answer questions. In the second hour, health officials will make a formal presentation about air monitoring in the area and the cancer patterns they found.

Comment period:

The public has until June 30 to comment on the findings of the investigation.

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