

Oil spill stirs study, debate over health impacts

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In this June 6, 2010 file photo, Beachgoers watch booming operations in Perdido Pass in Orange Beach, Ala. Alabama booming operations are being ramped up with oil from the Deepwater Horizon disaster hitting the coast. When an Associated Press reporter went scuba diving in the oil-streaked Gulf of Mexico this month, people commenting on websites worried about his health. But at the same time, the oil sure didn't bother some beachgoers in Alabama. (AP Photo/Dave Martin, File)

(AP) -- When an Associated Press reporter went scuba diving in the oil-streaked Gulf of Mexico this month, people commenting on websites worried about his health. But at the same time, the oil sure didn't bother some beachgoers in Alabama.

"I was in the water two hours yesterday," said Robert Theil, a French visitor to Orange Beach, as his sister acted as translator. "I'm not

worried. It would take a lot before it could hurt you."

Health officials say there seems to be little reason to worry at this point. But some note that health effects months or years from now remain a question mark, particularly for the workers who are in the thick of it, cleaning up oil from the BP spill in the Gulf.

Public health officials and scientists will take up the topic at a two-day meeting beginning Tuesday in New Orleans, organized by the Institute of Medicine at the request of the Department of Health and Human Services. The group will also talk about how best to watch for any potential problems.

HHS has already set aside \$10 million to study cleanup workers and Gulf residents over time.

In the meantime, some questions and answers:

Q: Has anyone gotten sick from the oil spilled in the Gulf?

A: Yes, there have been reports of illnesses, but relatively few among people not involved in the spill cleanup. Most of the reported illnesses were related to odors or fumes. Almost all were mild and temporary, and many were in early May, within the first few weeks of the April 20 explosion. The reports are based on a doctor's assessment, not on lab testing.

All but 35 of the 109 spill-related illnesses in Louisiana have been workers. Alabama has 29 reports of illnesses that might be related to the spill, and Florida and Mississippi have had none.

Q: So, what about the air? It safe to breathe?

A: For those along the coast, for the most part, yes. The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) has been monitoring the air since shortly after the spill; readings posted Friday show mostly good air quality. Some earlier results have found low levels of pollutants that can cause temporary problems like headaches, nausea or irritation of the eyes, nose and throat.

The pollutants have periodically pushed an industrial smell onshore in some place - one beachgoer compared it to a machine shop. But an oily odor does not necessarily mean it's harmful, said LuAnn White, director of Tulane University's Center for Applied Environmental Public Health.

Officials continue to test. "We are still concerned," said John Howard, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

And out on the water, tests have detected vapors from benzene, one of the chemicals in the oil that scientists say can cause cancer. The good news is that benzene can evaporate or burn off quickly, so the concentrations are much lower toward land.

Q: What about all those tar balls and splotches of oil on some beaches?

A: It's best to avoid them. Oil on bare skin should be washed off as soon as possible, health officials say. Soap and water, baby oil or petroleum jelly are the best way to remove it. Longer contact can cause skin to redden, swell and burn. The problem can get worse if the skin is exposed to the sun.

White compared it to spilling motor oil on your hands.

"Are you going to get sick? Probably not. But do you want to do it? I don't think so," she said.

But another expert cautioned that some chemicals in the oil and dispersants used in the cleanup can be easily absorbed through the skin. "People aren't paying close attention like they should," said Robert Herrick, an industrial hygiene expert at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Q: Can I swim in it?

A: Better not. You could get oil on your skin, and there's the added possibility of accidentally swallowing whatever's in the water. Louisiana beaches have been closed in Grande Isle and Fourchon, but because of cleanup efforts, not for health reasons. Alabama late last week lifted swimming advisories for beaches in Mobile County, but they remain in place for Baldwin County, near Florida.

Q: Are people along the Gulf coast worried they'll get sick?

A: Some are. Most aren't. There apparently haven't been any surveys asking Gulf residents if they're concerned about their health. But calls to poison control centers have been lower than expected, and officials in some Gulf states say they've heard more angst over the impacts on the environment and local business than about health.

"I look at it this way: It's from the Earth. If you drank it in your drinking water every day it would hurt you. But spend a week in the water on vacation and it's not going to," said Elaine Fox, who visited Orange Beach, Ala., with a group from Family Church in West Monroe, La.

She spent time photographing her pregnant daughter-in-law Christi Fox, 25, who lounged in the surf draped in a white cloth covering a white bikini. A few tar balls stuck to her bathing suit as she walked back to their condominium.

Q: How about the seafood? Is it safe to eat?

A: The president thinks so. Barack Obama ate Gulf seafood during his last visit to Mississippi. He declared that seafood from the region is safe, and also announced stepped-up inspections.

Parts of the Gulf with oil have been closed for fishing. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Food and Drug Administration are sampling fish from the Gulf and are to begin checking fish that come in to docks.

However, inspectors have yet to make an appearance at docksides, and some restaurants have been putting up signs saying they do not sell Gulf seafood. Some critics say testing needs to improve.

Q: Will there be long-term health effects?

A: They don't know. Some health officials say they don't think long-term illnesses are likely. But they've never seen pollution of this scale, and there are just too many unknowns to say for sure.

"It's theoretically possible, but at this point of time not something people are predicting will happen," said Dr. Thomas Miller, an assistant state health officer with Alabama's health department.

Some chemicals in the oil are associated with a cancer risk. But it can take decades for an environmental trigger to result in cancer. And when cancers do occur, it's difficult to sort out the real cause - for example, whether oil fumes inhaled over two months played a greater role than cigarette smoke inhaled in bars over the course of a lifetime.

While the [oil](#) is often described as toxic and poisonous, Tulane's LuAnn White said that can give the wrong impression.

"As a toxicologist, when I think of toxic, I think of something that will cause harmful effects at very low concentrations. Some of these components could cause effects - usually mild effects - but at very high concentrations," she said. "So when we look on a toxicity scale, these are not very toxic compounds."

More information: EPA: <http://www.epa.gov/bpspill/>

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