

High arsenic levels found in children near former French mine

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The former Salsigne gold and arsenic mine in Villaniere, southern France, which closed in 2004

Tests of dozens of children living near what was once the world's biggest arsenic mine have revealed worrying levels of the toxic element, French

officials said Tuesday, heightening fears that waste from the site is leaching into soil and groundwater.

The ARS health agency for the Occitanie region in southern France said it tested 103 children aged 11 or younger after residents became alarmed when the former Salsigne mine was flooded during heavy rains last October.

Of those, 38 had arsenic readings above the reference level of 10 microgrammes per gramme of creatine in urine samples, with 10 of those children showing levels above 15 microgrammes.

The ARS cautioned that new tests would be carried out in two months to determine whether the arsenic resulted from chronic exposure, or from acute exposure that can occur after eating certain foods like shellfish or meat.

"If a second test comes back above the reference level, ARS teams will offer families personalised support at their homes," the agency said.

But it acknowledged that "in the large majority of cases" high arsenic levels are the result of ingesting contaminated food or water.

'Nothing is done'

The Salsigne mine in the Aude valley, near Carcassonne, was the world's biggest source of the element, as well as Europe's largest gold mine, before it was closed in 2004.

Millions of tons of toxic waste were then stocked at five sites nearby, and local associations say some have begun to leak.

"Until we eliminate the cause of this, we can't address the problems,"

said Max Brail, mayor of the adjacent village of Lastours.

Brail said it was urgent to move the toxic waste to more secure sites, because "as soon as it rains, it feeds into the streams lower down. Everyone knows this but nothing is done."

Last month, the health agency began carrying out tests for all children 11 and younger in the area near the Orbiel river, below the Salsigne mine.

The move came after media reports in June said three boys aged four, seven and nine had arsenic levels ranging from 12 to 20 microgrammes per gramme of creatine.

Several parents called on local authorities to take urgent measures, and officials closed off access to some playgrounds and also began soil and atmospheric testing for the element.

They also prohibited swimming or fishing in the Orbiel river and banned the eating of fruits and vegetables produced in 12 nearby communes for up to four months.

Arsenic poisoning from long-term exposure can lead to discolouration and hardening of the skin, and eventually cause a variety of cancers.

Brail, the Lastours mayor, said that after last autumn's heavy rains, high arsenic levels were detected on the playground at the village school.

In response, workers removed layers of ground some 25 centimetres (10 inches) deep and then laid down asphalt, "and now there's no more arsenic," Brail said.

"But if there's more flooding, there's a risk the school will again be exposed," he said.

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