

RESOURCE MEDIA

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WASHINGTON LEADS THE NATION IN BREAST CANCER AND FEMALE MELANOMA RATES

State also has one of the highest rates of childhood asthma in the country

SEATTLE -- Washington state has the highest breast cancer and female melanoma rate in the country, as well as one of the highest rates of asthma. Those are some of the findings of the largest, most comprehensive look to date at the incidence of diseases with links to environmental contaminants.

Health advocates today said the report, "Health and Environmental Contaminants: What we know and what we need to know," is an important first step in coming to grips with the role of pollutants in the diseases afflicting Washington residents. It is part of a larger effort by the Collaborative on Health and the Environment – Northwest, a regional network of more than 270 researchers, healthcare providers and other groups to catalog links between chronic health problems and their environmental contributors. The report is based on the most current government data and scientific studies.

"We need a deeper understanding of the illnesses we face – what's causing them and what we can do to prevent them further," said Kate Davies, Ph.D., the report's author and a health researcher and faculty member at Antioch University Seattle. Dr. Davies is a member of a state panel developing a rule on toxic chemicals.

According to the National Cancer Institute 100,000 synthetic chemicals have been registered for use in the United States since World War II, from chemicals in consumer products to pesticides and pharmaceuticals. Meanwhile, some chronic diseases have reached epidemic proportions in the country.

Analyzing data from a wide range of studies, Dr. Davies took a conservative approach by limiting her analysis to health problems with strong or good evidence of links to environmental contaminants.

Among Dr. Davies' findings:

- The state has the nation's third-highest overall cancer rate for women, as well as the highest rates for both female melanoma and female breast cancer. She said there is no specific reason for this but noted that environmental exposures are clearly one of the many suspected links to the disease. In King County, she found that hazardous air pollutants give residents a cancer risk 100 times the goal set by the U.S. Clean Air Act.
- Washington state has the fifth highest rate in the nation for male melanoma.

- Washington state has the seventh highest prevalence of asthma in the United States. She said the state's air quality is one environmental suspect.
- In 1998, 14.5% of 13- to 17-year-olds in Washington state had asthma.
- Washington state ranks fourth nationally for the incidence of non-Hodgkins lymphoma in males, and sixth nationally for non-Hodgkins lymphoma in females.

Dr. Davies was cautious about blaming high disease rates entirely on pollutants although she said we now have evidence they do play a role. Indeed, a key finding of her report is the need for more research to better understand these links through mechanisms like the Washington State Environmental Public Health Tracking System as well as preventive action.

Elise Miller, executive director of the Washington State-based Institute for Children's Environmental Health, said the state can take steps now to protect our health by passing legislation to phase out all three types of toxic flame-retardants (PBDEs). These neurotoxic chemicals were recently found in the breast milk of all 40 women tested in a study by Northwest Environment Watch. Phasing out PBDEs is part of the state's broader policy to phase out persistent toxic chemicals, which build up in wildlife, our bodies and our food supply. Last week, the Departments of Ecology and Health called for a ban on all PBDEs.

“The cornerstone of public health is prevention,” said Miller. “We can make better choices to protect our children and future generations by passing state legislation to phase out these toxic flame-retardants and all chemicals that may persist and build up in our environment and in our bodies.”

“Pollution is a direct threat to our children's health,” said Dr. Bernard Weiss, professor of environmental medicine and pediatrics at the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry. “Government can take concrete steps toward reducing cancer and other disease rates by eliminating pesticide use on school grounds and taking other common sense measures aimed at promoting healthy communities.”

Pam Tazioli, a breast cancer survivor and the director of the Breast Cancer Fund's newly established office in Seattle said, “This cancer news should be a wake-up call for the state to take immediate action to help protect future generations of Washingtonians from this terrible disease.”

A copy of the full report can be accessed at www.iceh.org.

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