

Update for Stephen Foster Neighborhood

October 2009

Koppers Hazardous Waste Site

An Update from the Florida Department of Health about cancer investigations

What can a cancer investigation tell you?

Many communities have concerns about cancer. Because of such concerns, the Florida Department of Health (DOH), Division of Environmental Health, conducts cancer investigations or studies.

However, because of the difficulty in detecting a true cancer cluster, we do not do these types of studies routinely. We do them only when all three of these factors exist:

- A cluster is suspected,
- When we know harmful chemicals are in an area's soil, water, or air, and
- When the Florida DOH knows people have come into contact with these chemicals.

In recent years, scientists have done hundreds of cancer studies all over the nation. Only a handful ever verified true clusters. In Florida, we have not yet identified any clusters.

What is the purpose of a cancer investigation?

Florida DOH does them to see if an unexpected number of cases of cancer have occurred. To check on a suspected cancer cluster, Florida DOH works with the community to answer the following questions:

1. Is there an excess in the number of cases of a certain type of cancer in an area?
2. Do people living in an area have a common exposure to something that could cause cancer, like tobacco smoke or other harmful chemicals?
3. Is this exposure at a high enough level that it is thought to lead to disease?

A Word about Patient Listing Forms

This form allows the Florida DOH to confirm the type of cancer, the date of diagnosis and other facts. Once we receive a few of these forms, Florida DOH begins to define the area of study and what cancer types may be of concern. The form begins the process but once a study begins Florida DOH reviews ALL relevant cases of cancer in the area diagnosed during the time period. We do this through the Florida Cancer Data System (FCDS). **Therefore, even if you do not submit a form, the Florida DOH counts all cancer cases.** I think we should delete this statement as it may encourage people not to submit form and we want their involvement

What can a community learn from a cancer investigation?

No community is disease free. The Florida DOH may be able to discern under certain circumstances if an excess number of cancer cases exist. When communities are large enough, it is possible that a statistical valid analysis can be made. Research studies that have been able to confirm cancer clusters that had an environmental cause, involved investigations where several thousands of people or more were exposed over a long period of time. Sometimes statistics simply cannot show whether something in the air, soil, or water in a small community caused a case of cancer or not.

Even in areas where the Florida DOH knows some chemicals are in the air, soil or water, we may not know if those chemicals cause cancers. In other cases, we know the doses found are too low to cause cancer.

It is not easy to prove a link between a chemical and a type of cancer. Most known clusters were in work settings. In those cases, we may know about exposures to high doses for long periods of time. Also there are records in most work settings that give details about such exposures.

The Florida DOH is able to do only a few cancer investigations each year. We confirm the cancer cases in a community against Florida Cancer Data System (FCDS records). Florida DOH can project cancer rates for the community. We can compare them to rates in the community's county or to statewide rates. Florida DOH can review air, water, and soil testing results. In some cases, Florida DOH may find a need for more testing.

Review of current scientific research on cancer investigations suggests that:

- They rarely find a true cancer cluster,
- They are very time and resource intensive, and
- They may not be the best way to prove an excess of cancer cases. **A community may expect the agency to prove a link between cancer cases and a certain chemical. Florida DOH can rarely make such a link.**

Florida DOH seeks to give communities materials and resources to help them learn more about cancer, health, and chemicals in the air, soil and water.

What other sources of data are used in a cancer investigation?

We review other statewide cancer reports as well as the FCDS. Florida DOH also looks into other sources of vital data, such as whether people in an area use tobacco. In some cases, we may check other things, such as pathology reports, medical records, or death certificates. Florida DOH always includes steps in all of our studies to make sure to keep all health records and histories private.

For additional information about cancer or cancer investigations:

<http://www.cancer.org>

<http://www.cancer.gov/>

<http://fcds.med.miami.edu/>

<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/clusters/default.htm>

For more information about cancer investigations involving environmental contamination in Florida:

Call the Florida Department of Health, Division of Environmental Health, Bureau of Environmental Public Health Medicine at 850-245-4299 and ask to speak to someone about a cancer investigation.

