

Doctors getting tough on air pollution

DR. GOTT



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The lines are already being drawn in what may become a major health issue of the '90s: air pollution. Experts disagree about how serious the problem is, but many doctors and authorities at the Environmental Protection Agency believe that dirty air is an important — and preventable — cause of serious, permanent lung damage in healthy adults and children, as well as in patients with chronic pulmonary disorders.

At one end of the scale are representatives of industry whose views were heralded in a recent Wall Street Journal editorial critical of President Bush's \$11 billion-\$15 billion air clean-up plan. "The smog lobby ought to stand up and explain in detail what real risks justify the high cost. The draconian solutions seem out of proportion to what actually is known about the problem," the editorial said.

On the other hand, the EPA has reported that more than 80 areas in the country, containing more than 100 million people, fail to meet federal air-quality standards. According to lung specialists writing in the doctors' magazine Medical World News, the impact of air pollutants is considerable: depletion of pulmonary reserve, chronic inflammation involving virtually all lung tissue and susceptibility to infection.

Carcinogenic (cancer-causing) hydrocarbons are present, to varying degrees, in the air everyone breathes. These compounds are produced by automobiles, diesel engines and industrial manufacturing.

Of equal importance, however, are air pollutants such as sulfuric acid and nitrogen dioxide, both of which intensify the harmful effects of ozone, a naturally occurring, unstable form of oxygen that is poisonous to lung tissue. To the dismay of observers, adverse consequences of air pollution are increasingly being seen in small-town America where air-quality standards have been believed to be acceptable.

For example, studies by Dr. Homer Boushey, professor of pulmonary disease at the University of California, showed that physical activity in "normal" air was potentially hazardous: People performing intermittent exercise in supposedly "safe" unfiltered

air had the same inflammation and deterioration of lung function seen in people exposed to short-term high-ozone levels. In fact, athletes may be particularly prone to lung damage from ozone, because breathing through the mouth bypasses natural air filters in the nose; also, athletes breathe more deeply when exercising.

Although all adults lose lung capacity as they age, air pollution appears to increase the rate and severity of the depletion. Doctors, who treat asthma and other lung disorders, express concern about the increased incidence of asthma, a phenomenon they attribute to air pollution that is no longer confined to urban centers.

Unfortunately, prohibitive costs prevent researchers from performing the complex and sophisticated studies needed to prove unequivocally that normal persons are being affected by air pollution in non-urban areas.

Nonetheless, preliminary data suggest disturbing trends. For example:

- Harvard investigators discovered twice as much respiratory illness among schoolchildren in Steubenville, Ohio, (where air pollution is severe) than among youngsters in relatively unpolluted Portage, Wis.

- A 10-year study at the University of California at Los Angeles revealed accelerated loss of lung function in non-smoking adults living in polluted Glendora, Calif., compared to similar people in less polluted Lancaster, Calif.

- A study of 80 asthmatics in Glendora showed that 63 percent developed significant deterioration of breathing ability that was directly related to rising ozone levels exacerbated by air pollution.

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