

ATSDR Activities in the Newtown Community

Gainesville, Georgia

What is ATSDR?

ATSDR is the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a federal public health agency that deals with human health issues related to hazardous chemicals in the environment. ATSDR is not a regulatory agency and does not make or enforce laws.

The agency conducts public health assessments at sites where there are concerns about health issues that may be related to uncontrolled releases of hazardous chemicals into the environment. The public health assessment evaluates site exposure conditions and data about chemicals detected in the air, water, or soil at and around the site. ATSDR then evaluates the information to determine whether there is a threat to the health of people in the vicinity.

If chemicals are detected at levels of public health concern, ATSDR provides information to community members on ways to limit their exposure to the chemicals. ATSDR also makes recommendations to other health and environmental agencies. These recommendations may be for further sampling of air, water, or soil in the community or for immediate actions to reduce or prevent further exposure. To find out more about ATSDR, visit the ATSDR web page at www.atsdr.cdc.gov.

Why did ATSDR get involved at Newtown?

Residents in the area were concerned about health problems of people in the community and whether the problems could be related to emissions from an adjacent junkyard and from nearby facilities. The Newtown Florist Club asked ATSDR to investigate whether health problems of people in the community could be caused by exposure to environmental contaminants.

What were the results of the ATSDR public health assessments in Newtown?

The first public health assessment for Newtown, which was released for public comment in October 2000, evaluated:

- existing cancer and lupus studies (1990, 1995)
- data from biological sampling (1994)
- data from air sampling (1997)
- data from groundwater sampling (1993, 1994)
- data from storm water runoff sampling (1993)
- data from tap water sampling (1999), and
- data from soil sampling (1993, 1994)

The sampling was conducted by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Georgia Department of Human Resources, Georgia State University, and the City of Gainesville Public Utilities Department. The health studies were conducted by Emory University, the Georgia Department of Human Resources, and Morehouse School of Medicine. ATSDR conducted limited ambient air sampling in the area and sampled surface soil in the community playground. ATSDR also collected and reviewed 1980–1996 cancer incidence data for Newtown.

ATSDR requested that tap water be sampled, and the City of Gainesville Public Utilities Department sampled tap water in 1999. ATSDR also investigated concerns that community members had about rodent infestation that they believed was associated with grain spilled at a nearby Purina facility. Residents were given the name and phone number of a rodent expert at the University of Georgia who offered to provide community education on preventing rodent infestation. Because community members were concerned about the reliability of a 1990 cancer study conducted by the Georgia Department of Human Resources, ATSDR conducted a review of that study and of cancer incidence data.

Because residents expressed concerns about the junkyard nearby, ATSDR requested that the Georgia Environmental Protection Division make an unannounced visit to inspect the site.

In February 2002, ATSDR released a second public health assessment document that further evaluated air exposures. Residents are concerned about past exposure to contaminants in air, but there is a lack of past air data. To answer questions about previous emissions, ATSDR conducted an air modeling investigation to estimate past exposure based on past emission data from local facilities.

Current exposure

On the basis of all information available to ATSDR, it appears that current levels of chemicals in air, groundwater, and soil in Newtown are well below levels known to cause adverse health effects. ATSDR therefore concludes that health problems are unlikely to be related to exposure to chemicals currently released from facilities near Newtown.

Past exposure

Limitations of the 2002 health assessment are:

- Data on past emissions are available for 1983 to the present. Residents are concerned about releases for that time, but are more concerned about earlier years. Many of their current health concerns would be the result of many years of exposure. Due to limited data, it is not possible to evaluate the potential for health effects related to air releases that occurred before 1983.
- It is well known that facility emissions have decreased significantly since more stringent air standards were adopted in the 1970s and 1980s.
- The incidence of lupus cases in Newtown is significantly higher than that of the general U.S. population. The cause of lupus, however, is unknown. Some medications appear to cause the onset of lupus. It is not possible at the present time to draw a clear association between chemicals present in Newtown and lupus.

- Air modeling indicated that mobile emissions (such as emissions from cars, trucks, and trains) cause the greatest risk to Newtown residents. Newtown is near a major highway, railroad line, and a heavily trafficked industrial area. Residents may have an increased risk of respiratory illness from exposure to air emissions from these sources. Emissions from other sources may also increase risk, but not to the extent of mobile emissions. Residents sensitive to these emissions may experience increased rates of respiratory diseases, such as asthma, bronchitis, difficulty breathing, and shortness of breath. Associations between other health conditions and emissions cannot be evaluated, because data on past emissions is limited.

Conclusion

Current exposure to ambient air from mobile sources in Newtown is similar to that of other communities near major highways. The lack of air data for the years prior to 1983 prevent us from evaluating whether exposure for those years could be associated with residents' current health problems.

What's next?

ATSDR will host a health fair in late summer 2002. We encourage Newtown residents to attend and share their health concerns. Physicians and other experts on lupus, cancer, and respiratory illness will be available to discuss these subjects and other health issues. A newsletter announcing the date and time of the health fair will be mailed to residents or published in the local newspaper.

Where can I read a copy of the Newtown public health assessments?

The Newtown public health assessments are available for you to read at the main branch of the Hall County Public Library located at:

127 Main Street, NW
Gainesville, Georgia 30501
770-532-3311

Where can I get additional information?

For additional information, please contact any of the following ATSDR staff members:

- **Brian Kaplan**, Health Assessor
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