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I-95 leading risk factor for cancer

Many other illnesses linked to proximity to busy highways

By SUMMER HARLOW, The News Journal

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Judy Fardoulis is well aware that living in Wilmington a block from Interstate 95 can't be good for her health.

Over the years, the Cool Springs resident has learned to keep the front windows of her house, which face the ever-congested highway, closed tight.

"I have black soot on the window sill all the time," she said. "I have to hose it off."

With such tangible evidence of pollution, Fardoulis wasn't surprised that I-95 runs right through four of the eight cancer clusters identified in a state report released Thursday, and borders a fifth.

Researchers and scientists say it's no coincidence: air pollution from traffic can threaten Delawareans' health. And the closer someone lives to I-95 or other busy roads, the higher the risk of cancer, asthma, heart disease and other illnesses.

Some studies show life expectancies could drop by as much as three years.

"We know that vehicles contribute the lion's share of the cancer risk in our everyday air," said Richard Kassel, director of the Clean Fuels and Vehicles Project for the Natural Resources Defense Council. "You don't need to be a rocket scientist to feel the difference in the air when you're on the shoulder of the highway and when you're away at the beach, and studies confirm pollution levels are always higher along busy roadways."

And it's not just I-95 -- already carrying more than 230,000 vehicles a day and being widened to accommodate even more tractor-trailers and cars -- that could be making people sick.

If similar studies were conducted throughout the Northeast corridor, even across the country, results would be the same, Kassel said.

"It's true whether we're talking about I-95 or Madison Avenue in New York City," he said. "Studies from around the country and world have shown over and over again that pollution levels are much higher along busy roadways and that the health impacts track those pollution levels. That means we need cleaner cars and trucks and we need to figure out a way to relieve some of the congestion that increases the pollution even more."

The World Health Organization reports that worldwide, about three times more people die from the effects of air pollution than die in traffic accidents.

Trying to reduce congestion

With the First State's population expected to hit a million before 2025, and more people driving alone, officials and residents are calling for more walkable, transit-friendly communities that would cut down on the number of vehicles on the road. Across the country, states and cities are looking at innovative ways to cut down on traffic, and thus clean up the air.

Overall, air quality is improving, thanks to stricter emissions standards for cars, trucks and buses, said Catherine Rossi,

AAA Mid-Atlantic spokeswoman. In the 1970s, she said, the pollution from fuel engines was similar to "raw sewage going into the air."

Advances in technology will result in emissions reductions, even with an increase in vehicle-miles traveled, according to the Wilmington Area Planning Council's 2030 regional plan. Currently, the region does not meet Environmental Protection Agency standards for ozone and New Castle County exceeds the limits for "particulate matter" in the air, caused by auto emissions, construction and road dust.

New standards for cars, light trucks and SUVs were enacted last year to increase fuel-efficiency standards to 35 miles per gallon by 2020 -- the first increase in more than 20 years. That's expected to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 18 percent, or the equivalent of taking 60 million cars off the road.

"While maintaining a strong roadway system is essential, we must make sure the cars and trucks on the road are efficient and the fuels we put in them are clean," said Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Clean Air and Nuclear Security. "But we must also provide Delawareans with alternative methods of transportation, such as mass transit, passenger rail, sidewalks and bike lanes. These alternatives help improve air quality, reduce our reliance on foreign oil and support healthier lifestyles."

New standards also require the engines of diesel trucks and buses to be 90 percent cleaner. According to the American Lung Association, diesel engines release 100 times more sooty particles than gas engines.

Until those older trucks and buses are replaced, filters can be purchased for \$5,000 to \$8,000 per bus. New York City buses have been retrofitted with such filters, reducing transit bus pollution by 97 percent during the past decade, Kassel said.

For every \$1 invested in cleaner buses and trucks, there's a resulting \$12 to \$16 in health benefits, according to the EPA.

"There are a lot of different variables in the cancer mix. Income and smoking and diet are all a part of it," Kassel said. "But there's no question that when we look at the air pollution piece of the puzzle, diesel exhaust is at the top of the list, and it's a fixable problem."

The Delaware Department of Transportation follows EPA processes that assess the impact of road work on air quality, said department spokesman Darrel Cole. For example, approval for the I-95 fifth-lane widening project was contingent on showing that the expansion would not raise emissions above federal standards, he said.

"There is currently no forecasting process that forecasts whether road work will impact cancer rates," Cole said. "There are multiple factors and sources that are involved in causing cancer, and coincidence does not necessary mean causality."

Risk spreads wide

Studies show that 500 feet to 1,500 feet from major roadways, the levels of traffic-related pollutants, such as soot from gasoline and diesel, are high enough to increase health risks. Congestion also affects pollution levels, as stop-and-go traffic can cause three times as much pollution as free-flowing traffic, according to the 2007 Environmental Defense report, "All Choked Up: Heavy Traffic, Dirty Air and the Risk to New Yorkers."

Jing Nie, a postdoctoral fellow at the University at Buffalo in New York, found a higher risk of breast cancer among women in upstate New York who lived close to heavy-traffic areas during certain times of their lives.

"This is just one study, so we can't say for sure that traffic is linked to breast cancer, but our research suggests there could be a link," he said. Further studies are needed to see if similar results could be duplicated elsewhere in the country, he said.

Since 1967, David Gwyn has lived on North Harrison Street in Wilmington, just three blocks from I-95. Between the

drug dealers, the traffic and the pollution, he's been thinking about moving to get away from it all.

"There are tractors and trailers and tractors and trailers and that's where all the pollution comes from," said Gwyn, 69. "You can just breathe it. When you're standing outside, you know you're breathing in that pollution."

Judy Wright, a resident of the Trinity Vicinity neighborhood flanking I-95 in Wilmington, wonders whether that pollution triggered her diagnosis of asthma. Wright, 63, moved to her home -- a half-block from the highway -- in 1986, and within about five years, her doctor told her she had asthma.

"My doctor said it was because of a 'hostile environment,' " she said.

In the short-term, people need to car-pool more, walk more and use more energy-efficient vehicles, said Wilmington City Councilman Charles Potter. And the offending chemical plants need to clean up their acts, he said. He's not sure what the long-term solution is.

"What do you do? Knock down 95 and just use [Interstate] 495?" he asked. "We can't redirect 95, so we've got to come up with some kind of rail plan to cut down emissions. It will take a lot of brainstorming."

Not to mention political will, he said.

Any change has to start in government, with the "big boys," Wright said, because even with gas approaching \$4 a gallon, people aren't likely to change their driving habits.

Of course, if it were found that I-95 literally is killing us, she said, people would flee for the countryside.

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