Ozone linked to sinus problems

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor
Second in a series

Whenever ozone levels rise in Baton Rouge, so do complaints of sinus problems, acute asthma attacks and other upper respiratory problems, say two local doctors who specialize in such health matters.

"Without a doubt," there is a correlation between days of high ozone levels and complaints of upper respiratory problems, says Dr. James Kidd III, a local allergist.

Baton Rouge has one of the worst problems of any city its size in the nation, according to a comparison of data done by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The city's ozone pollution is linked directly to emissions from area industries, according to officials with both the EPA and state air quality division. The Louisiana Chemical Association disagrees with that position.

While the debate continues over allegations that air pollution in Louisiana is a major cause of cancer in the area, the link between air pollution and some other health problems appears certain in the minds of physicians interviewed.

"We notice a definite relationship," between high ozone levels and complaints of problems with sinus, runny eyes and similar problems, says Dr. Aaron Roy, an ear, nose and throat specialist.

"Any asthmatic will wheeze if given enough exposure to ozone," says Dr. Roy.

When ozone pollution levels get high in Baton Rouge, he sees more patients with asthmatic problems and more persons with allergic reactions.

Usually people don't realize what's causing their problems, the doctor says.

There are an estimated 136,000 people in East Baton Rouge Parish who present special risks of adverse health effects from ozone pollution, says Ben Fontaine of the Louisiana Lung Association. Those include adults suffering from asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis, as well as children and elderly people.

Fontaine said that these individuals may be affected adversely by levels that don't even reach the unhealthy

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Research in this area is in its infancy, and Louisiana, with its excess of hydrocarbon emissions, would be a "perfect research site," Fontaine suggests.

Unfortunately, the general items, such as ozone and suspended particulates, that are reported in the Pollution Standard Index do not tell much about real dangers that might be lurking in the air, says John Laseter, an analytical chemist with Enviro-Health Systems Inc. of New Orleans.

The PSI measures total suspended particulates, but the real question is not how much material is in the air, but what the material is, says Laseter, who has worked internationally on solutions to pollution problems.

While ozone itself causes illness, some of the specific substances that form ozone can have more severe health effects of their own, he says, citing vinyl chloride as an example.

Vinyl chloride is known to cause cancer in humans and thousands of pounds of the material have been released into the area's air in "emergency emissions" in recent years.

Loy says that emergency emissions are sometimes necessary to avoid dangerous situations at plants and are not abused by the chemical industry.

No one really knows what is being emitted into Baton Rouge air, says Dr. Velma Campbell, a specialist in occupational medicine at Oschner Foundation Clinic in New Orleans.

Spot tests done for EPA in past years have shown the presence of cancer-causing materials in the air in some parts of the Baton Rouge area, she says.

But she that a doctor can't go to officials and find out what a patient in a certain part of the state is being exposed to on a routine basis.

The Department of Environmental Quality has begun a toxic air pollutants program that should begin to answer some of those questions in the future, she says.

Those answers should provide a help to doctors and to cancer researchers, but will probably still leave many questions unanswered, because there is not sufficient testing data on many substances to determine whether they cause cancer or other long term health effects, Dr. Campbell says.

Loy maintains that the alleged relationship between industrial emissions and cancer are overblown.

There is no cancer epidemic in Louisiana, he says.

"If you want to stop lung cancer in Baton Rouge, stop smoking," says Loy.

While the cancer debate goes on, local physicians continue to treat the upper respiratory ailments they see whenever an ozone smog hangs over Baton Rouge.