Respiratory woe blamed on ozone

By ROD DREHER
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Local doctors treated more patients than usual last week for respiratory maladies, possibly aggravated by the unhealthful levels of ozone pollution fouling the air in the Baton Rouge area.

“No doubt about it, we’ve seen more people in the last few days,” said Dr. Stanley Peters, a local ear, nose and throat physician who also treats patients with allergies.

The amount of ozone in the air around Baton Rouge climbed into the unhealthful range three straight days last week, according to Department of Environmental Quality data. Friday’s air quality reading was in the good range, DEQ reported. The air quality reading for Saturday will not be available until Monday.

Most people complaining of difficulties have a history of allergies and respiratory ailments, doctors said. But even some with normally healthy lungs and sinuses have been affected by the ozone-clogged air.

“We’ve had more patients complaining of eyes burning, throat burning and burning sensations in the chest,” said allergist Dr. James M. Kidd III.

Ozone is produced when nitrogen oxide from industrial and automobile emissions combines with hydrocarbons from vehicles, natural sources and industry, then reacts with sunlight. Beneficial in the upper atmosphere, where it filters out cancer-causing ultraviolet rays, ozone is a health problem when it stays close to the ground.

“Ozone is an oxidant molecule that is very irritating to the respiratory tract,” Kidd said. “It especially irritates the already-inflamed respiratory tract of a patient with allergies or chronic lung disease.”

“In certain susceptible individuals, it can promote asthmatic attacks. In patients with chronic sinus disease or chronic sinus inflammation, it can exacerbate it,” Kidd said.

If the amount of ozone is high enough, even healthy people can be stricken with respiratory problems, doctors said.

“Someone who smokes, for instance, already has a chronic irritation of their membranes. If they’re exposed to additional irritants, that sometimes can push them over the edge,” Peters said.

“Even in normal patients, once the ozone concentration gets very high — around 10 parts per million — virtually everyone will experience some effects,” Kidd said.

Kidd said the long-term effects of ozone exposure are “debatable, but continual provoking by noxious stimuli can lead to chronic bronchitis, emphysema or some other obstructive respiratory disease.”

Experts warn asthmatics and those with breathing problems to stay inside on bad ozone days.

“There is very little ozone indoors, especially if the residence is air-conditioned,” Kidd said.

Kidd said the “worst-case scenario” involves a patient with respiratory tract problems who goes outside and exercises on a bad ozone day.

Despite the bad news about air quality, Peters finds it encouraging that more of his patients, especially blue-collar workers, are voicing concern about the pollution problem in this area.

“I do find that the lay people coming into the office are much more concerned about it. They talk about it more,” Peters said. “It used to be something that was discussed only in the upper income brackets and the higher education levels.”

Since many working-class families in Baton Rouge live close to industrial smokestacks belching pollution into the atmosphere, Peters said they are in greater danger of getting sick than most.

“The closer you are to where these things are being produced, the higher the concentrations around you,” he said.

“They are at an increased risk for any of the effects these things may produce, whether it be simply itchy, watery eyes or increased exposure to cancer,” he said.