NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Why are men in southern Louisiana more prone to lung cancer than those who live in the north part of the state? Researchers don't know yet. But they have established one thing — the men in those parts tend to drink more boozes, more beer, more wine, more strong coffee, eat more seafood.

Can this be significant? It hasn't been ruled out, but one researcher, William D. Johnson, doesn't plan to cut down his daily beer intake because of the findings.

The intake of alcohol, coffee and seafood remain among the factors being considered in this medical detective project, but Johnson, who is assistant professor of biometry at Louisiana State University's Medical School here, says a more probable villain is the area's shipyards. And it is likely the problem will be a combination of several things, he adds.

Whatever the main cause, odds are it will involve something in the work environment, not lifestyle. That deduction was drawn because the rate of lung cancer among women in southern Louisiana is not excessive.

Trying to pin down why lung cancer strikes more frequently in the south is like the proverbial search for a needle in a haystack. "We interview a man with lung cancer, then we locate a man in the same neighborhood, same age, same race, as much alike as possible except he doesn't have cancer, and interview him," says Johnson.

"All that data goes on punch cards and can be run through a computer. In a couple more years we expect a pattern to emerge. Than we test the pattern with laboratory experiments." The study was begun after a National Cancer Institute report showed 38 south Louisiana parishes were among the top 10 percent in the nation in frequency of lung cancer, and 13 of those parishes were in the top 1 percent.

At 72 lung cancer deaths per 100,000 residents, St. Bernard Parish, which stretches south of New Orleans, had a rate 140 percent higher than the national average of 50, the study showed.

Johnson said one odd aspect of the national study was that the high rate of lung cancer seemed to have a correlation to the amount of surface water in the area. All 13 of Louisiana's highest-rated parishes, for example, are either adjacent to the Mississippi River or beside the Gulf of Mexico or Lake Pontchartrain.

That's why shipyards are suspect — plus the fact that a lot of asbestos is used in shipbuilding. The dust of asbestos fiber is known to cause lung cancer.

"People in South Louisiana have a history of working in shipbuilding and shipbuilding has been linked with lung cancer," Johnson says.

"The same thing cropped up for Georgia counties where, during the war, a large population worked in shipbuilding. Of course, there are other industrial exposures, too."