

State: Crews Face Greater Risk From Heat Than Oil

BATON ROUGE, La. (June 3) — Most of the health troubles suffered by Gulf of Mexico cleanup crews have been caused by heat exhaustion, not exposure to crude oil or chemical dispersants, Louisiana health officials say.

“Heat-related complaints are really our biggest concern right now,” Lisa Faust, spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Hospitals, told AOL News today. “We’re seeing a lot of workers now with heat-related illnesses, and we want to encourage them to take the right precautions, because it’s hot out there.”

Three workers were treated Wednesday at a Thibodaux-area hospital for symptoms indicating heat exhaustion, Faust said. The agency has not yet finished a complete tally of what health troubles workers have been treated for, she said.

Patrick Semansky, AP

Workers clean up oil at Port Fourchon Beach in Fourchon, La., on Tuesday. Health officials blame heat exhaustion for most of the health problems experienced by cleanup crews on the oil spill thus far.

The atmosphere around the oiled coast

does not pose health risks on an order faced by ground-zero workers after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, or by workers after other high-profile disasters such as the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident in the Ukraine, said LuAnn White, director of Tulane University’s Center for Applied Environmental Public Health.

State and federal officials are concerned about workers’ exposure to dispersants and toxic oil fumes — though scientists said there are too many variables to predict whether they’ll face long-term illnesses.

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Liz Condo, Pool / AP

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“We really want to monitor these workers, because we don’t want anything to happen to them. They need to be careful;

they do need to have the safety equipment and use safety procedures,” White said.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services opened a medical unit in Venice, La., this week, after at least seven workers were treated at a suburban New Orleans hospital with complaints of headaches and chest pain. The agency said such symptoms might not have been caused by chemical or oil fumes.

“So far, surveillance efforts have detected complaints of throat irritation, eye irritation, nausea, headache and coughs — these could be caused by a number of conditions, but we’re watching them closely,” HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said in a statement.

White said oil that washes up on beaches and in marshes has spent so much time drifting on the water’s surface that nearly all of its toxic elements have evaporated by the time it turns into tar balls. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s analysis said the oil contains elements that “are acutely toxic but because they evaporate readily, they are generally a concern only when oil is fresh.”

“It’s ugly and nasty, but it’s not very toxic,” said White, an environmental toxicologist. “If you rubbed it all over yourself, you maybe could get some skin irritation. But it has an extremely low order of toxicity.”

Gulf Oil Spill

AFP/Getty Images

500 photos

Oil gushes from BP’s blown-out oil well in the Gulf of Mexico as the claws of a remotely operated vehicle work to stop the spill Thursday. BP said it was able to cut the broken pipe that is spewing the oil. But the cut was jagged, which will make it tougher to fit a cap over the pipe, a federal official said. **Click through for more oil spill photos.**

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AFP/Getty Images

BP

The site of the leak is 50 miles from Louisiana's uninhabited barrier islands, and the oil has been leaking for 45 days. Leaked oil spends days on the surface of the water, evaporating in 90-degree temperatures, before it hits land.

President Barack Obama handled a tar ball when he was in Louisiana last week, which White said is good evidence that that the beached oil poses only minor health risks.

"I can guarantee you: If there's a [negative] health effect, the president wouldn't have touched that tar ball," White said.

The Environmental Protection Agency is performing air testing and, through last week, did not find dangerous levels of oil-related chemicals. The agency said people can smell the oil long before the air reaches levels that could cause short-term health problems.

George Cobb, professor of environmental toxicology at Texas Tech University, said it's tough to predict how workers will be affected by oil fumes because people's sensitivity can vary greatly.

"When I'm around diesel fumes, those fumes make me nauseous. Sometimes it's almost debilitating," Cobb said. "But then there are other people for whom the smell of diesel fuel has no visible effects. No light-headedness, no nausea, nothing."

The Associated Press reported that commercial fisherman John Wunstell Jr. joined a class-action lawsuit against BP after he spent a night on a vessel near the source of the spill and left complaining of a severe headache, upset stomach and nose bleed.

"I began to ache all over," he said in the affidavit, according to the AP. "I was completely unable to function at this point and feared that I was seriously ill."

Scientists are also unsure of the health risks posed by the chemical dispersant crews are using to break up masses of oil. Nearly 1 million gallons of total dispersant has been deployed — 755,000 gallons sprayed from airplanes and 238,000 sprayed near the seafloor, according to BP's latest data.

White said the chemical is quickly and thoroughly diluted in the gulf waters and would only pose a risk to those who come in direct physical contact with it.

Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen, the federal government's overseer of the oil spill response, said it's not clear whether people on shore would be affected by the chemical.

"I'm not sure we really understand if there is a connection between the air delivery of dispersant and folks being impacted by that on land," Allen said.

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