

Recent anecdotal evidence of medical symptoms attributed to emissions from the Cockburn Cement Limited lime/cement factory in Russell Road, Munster

In January/February 2017 residents living near the factory were invited by local community group, Cockburn Pollution Stoppers, to send emails to the Office of the Appeals Convenor setting out their experiences with "dust" and "odours" from the factory. The intent was to support an appeal made on their behalf for more stringent conditions to be imposed on toxic pollution being emitted by the factory.

Nearly fifty residents of Beeliar, Yangebup and Munster reported in their emails that they and/or members of their family had suffered medical symptoms which they attribute to exposure to toxic gases and particulates from the factory.

This followed a letter drop providing them with information about the toxic gases known to be emitted from the factory and the potential medical symptoms associated with exposure to these various toxic gases and particulates.

The reported symptoms appear to be consistent with exposure to toxic gases and particulates, as follows:

2.1 Respiratory and nasal symptoms

Breathlessness, constant/repetitive coughing, chesty cough, aggravation of asthma, sinus congestion, running nose, excessive/build up of phlegm, bronchiolitis, exacerbation of bronchiectasis, sneezing, onset of asthma, loss of lung function (tested), wheezing, constant blocked nose, bronchitis (use of machine required), nose bleeds, pneumonia, acute respiratory symptoms requiring hospitalization.

These symptoms are consistent with exposure to sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, hydrogen chloride, volatile organic compounds, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and hydrogen fluoride or a “cocktail” of these gases as well as exposure to quicklime or Portland cement particulates which are strongly alkaline (12 pH).

2.2 Throat symptoms

Constant dry throat, burning sensation in throat, constant irritated throat, sore throat were reported.

These symptoms are also consistent with exposure to sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, hydrogen chloride, volatile organic compounds, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and hydrogen fluoride or a “cocktail” of these gases as well as exposure to quicklime or Portland cement particulates which are strongly alkaline (12 pH).

2.23 Eye symptoms

Irritation in eyes, red eyes, reduced sight, eye soreness, itchy eyes, weeping eyes, watery eyes, ‘sticky’ eyes were reported.

These symptoms are consistent with exposure to particulates (in particular, Portland cement and quicklime), hydrogen chloride, particulates, volatile organic compounds, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons or a “cocktail” of these gases.

2.3 Skin symptoms

Skin rash and eczema were reported.

These symptoms are also consistent with exposure to particulates (in particular, Portland cement and quicklime), hydrogen chloride, particulates, volatile organic compounds, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons or a “cocktail” of these gases.

2.4 Neurological/psychological symptoms

Recurrent/constant headaches, migraine headache, dizziness, nausea, brain fog, sense of confusion, depression, weakness/extreme fatigue/lethargy.

These symptoms are consistent with exposure to carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds or some heavy metals (e.g. mercury).

2.6 Other symptoms

Frequent vomiting (2 children in different families), frequent vomiting with blood in vomit (one child), constant flu-like symptoms, aggravation of diagnosed common variable immune deficiency (one child), aggravation of heart problems (one person), elevated blood level of mercury levels (one person). These symptoms are consistent with exposure to toxic gases and, in the case of mercury, exposure to airborne particulates containing mercury.

This anecdotal evidence suggests that the same symptoms of ill health recorded in 2010 by the Parliamentary Inquiry into Cockburn Cement Limited are still being suffered by residents and by a new generation of children.

In 2010 the Parliamentary Committee and the Government was prepared to act to require Cockburn Cement Limited to install “baghouse” filters on its factory to reduce dust emitted from its lime kilns, even though the medical evidence of ill health from dust exposure was anecdotal and not proven with scientific or medical rigour (see page 108, paragraph 3.80 of the Parliamentary Inquiry). However, no measures were introduced to reduce the range and quantity of toxic gases being emitted from its Munster factory or ‘fugitive’ dust emissions from open stockpiles of coal, lime kiln dust, Portland cement ‘clinker’ and shell sand kept on site.

Medical practitioners who are concerned that a patient may have developed symptoms from exposure to toxic gases and/or particulates should keep detailed notes on such patients and notify the Health Department about their concerns.