

FAQs

Whyalla Health Impact Study

Why did the Department of Health undertake the Whyalla Health Impact Study?

A Whyalla Health Impact Study has been undertaken in response to community concerns about possible health effects of red dust from the nearby steelworks. The Health Impact Study was undertaken using available data sources from the SA Department of Health.

What did the study find?

The study found that there are higher than expected numbers of lung cancers, and higher than expected hospital admissions for various other diseases. A link to red dust emitted from the steelworks could not be demonstrated or ruled out, and a cause for the higher than expected numbers could not be determined.

Cancer registry data shows there were 32 more cases of lung cancer than expected during the period 1999 – 2004, compared to similar towns (95 cases compared to the 63 expected). The study also looked at bowel and liver cancer, with no increase shown.

The analysis of cancer registry data did not find higher rates in areas of the city closer to the pellet plant -- those areas most affected by the dust.

Hospital admissions data, the available data source for non-cancer diseases that result in admissions to hospital, shows increased admissions for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), emphysema, asthma in children, alcoholic liver disease, chronic hepatitis, various anaemias.

Why is there no proven link?

The diseases highlighted in the study are common conditions that can be caused by a range of factors. These illnesses also develop over a long period of time – often decades – which makes it difficult to identify a specific cause.

The data that have been used in the study were taken from the Cancer Registry data and hospital admissions information. These data do not look at the lifestyle of the individual – where they were born, whether they smoked during their life, where they have worked and a range of other factors.

While a cause is not known, it is important that people seek medical advice if they have any health concerns.

What does the study mean for my health?

It may not mean anything. It is unclear what, if any, are the potential health impacts on individuals. If you have concerns, you should see your General Practitioner, or call the Whyalla Health Information Line on 1800 186 815.

How can I find out if I have any health risks?

Contact your usual GP to make an appointment.



What sort of tests should I have?

Your GP will decide if any tests are necessary, based on their clinical judgement. Tests could include lung or blood tests, but this will be up to your GP.

Who will pay for my consultation?

The cost will depend on what your GP usually charges.

What about future problems?

The diseases identified in the study are all fairly common in the population. We don't know for sure why there is a higher than expected number in Whyalla and so we cannot say what may happen in the future. You should keep in contact with your GP if you have concerns.

What if I live close to the steelworks? Am I at greater risk?

The study didn't show that people closest to the steelworks were at greater risk. In fact, higher numbers of lung cancer were seen further from the plant, in a part of Whyalla not heavily affected by dust. It may mean that the cancers are not associated with the dust but with some other factor. In terms of respiratory and liver diseases, it is not clear from the available data if one part or other of the town is more heavily affected.

What could it be if it isn't dust?

The higher than expected health problems could be related to lifestyle factors like smoking or nutrition, could be related to previous work in high risk occupations, or could be a statistical anomaly.

I worked at the steelworks for five years, but left three years ago. Is my health at risk?

Regular health checks of workers at the steelworks do not show they are at greater risk of health problems.

I have a two-year old daughter. Is she more at risk of developing asthma?

The study has shown a small increase in hospital admissions for asthma and respiratory infections in children, although once again, the cause is not known.

Where can I get more health information?

Visit the SA Health Department website <http://www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/envirom-health-index.htm> or call the Whyalla Health Information Line on 1800 186 815