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## Toxins in air from evaporating oil may pose greater threat to Gulf residents than oily water

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Cleanup crews work to remove oil in Orange Beach, AL on Monday, June 14, 2010. (AP Photo/Dave Martin).

Toxins that are released into the air from evaporating oil and dispersants may pose a greater health risk to clean-up workers and Gulf residents than oily water when the thickest parts of the oil slick wash ashore.

Media coverage of the BP oil disaster, thus far, has largely focused on the threats to wildlife and the potential economic impacts, while downplaying health risks to Gulf coast residents.

Scientists and researchers, however, are keenly aware of potential health risks to people not only from exposure to oil in the water, but also to fumes in the air.

[The Institute for Southern Studies \(ISS\)](#) [reported](#) as early as May 10 that, “the

latest evaluation of air monitoring data shows a serious threat to human health from airborne chemicals emitted by the ongoing deep water gusher.”

On May 14, [WWLTV](#) in New Orleans also ran a report warning of the danger of airborne toxins:

The chemicals released into the air by evaporating oil and/or dispersants include Hydrogen Sulfide, Benzene, Methylene Chloride, 2-Butoxyethanol and other toxic gases known as Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs). All are highly toxic to humans and physical reactions from exposure to these gases may include:

- Drowsiness
- Irritation of eyes, nose or throat
- Coughing or difficulty breathing
- Dizziness
- Nausea or vomiting
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Headaches

- Tremors
- Confusion
- Convulsions
- Unconsciousness
- Death (at very high levels)

Clean-up workers offshore and residents on the Gulf coast have already reported many of these symptoms. Alan Levine, Louisiana's Health Secretary, [told CBS News](#) there have been 75 people so far reporting spill-related symptoms, mostly flu-like respiratory woes. Levine believes it will continue to get worse. [According to CNN](#), 15 cases have been reported in Alabama. This may have prompted the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to announce that it is [stepping up air quality monitoring](#) on the Gulf coast.

#### Levels of Airborne Contaminants in Wake of BP Oil Spill

Date	Hydrogen Sulfide (ppb)	VOCs (ppb)
April 28	none detected	none detected
April 29	no data	none detected
April 30	no data	3,084
May 1	no data	923
May 2	30	3,416
May 3	1,192	780
May 4	46	1,243
May 5	1,010	37
May 6	1,000	483
May 7	280	none detected

*(Institute for Southern Studies chart based on Louisiana Environmental Action Network's analysis of EPA Data)*

Source: [The Institute for Southern Studies](#), Wilma Subra.

A [report published by the Louisiana Environmental Action Network \(LEAN\)](#) analyzed data released by the EPA taken from a testing site in Venice, LA between April 26 and May 26 (see chart). The results show unsafe levels of both Hydrogen Sulfide and VOCs in the air.

For instance, on May 3 hydrogen sulfide had been detected at concentrations more than 100 times greater than the level known to cause physical reactions in people. The fluctuations in readings are attributed to many factors such as wind speed and direction, heat index and other atmospheric conditions that vary on a daily basis.

A [more recent report](#) published by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) analyzes offshore air quality data released by BP. The findings replicate conclusions in earlier reports that the level of toxins in the air is unsafe for humans. "Nearly 70% (275 out of 399) of offshore air samples had detectable levels of hydrocarbons and nearly 1 in 5 (73 out of 399) had levels greater than 10 parts per million (ppm), which is an EPA cutoff level for further investigation. 6 samples exceed 100 ppm which in a previous monitoring summary was labeled as the action limit."

The report also notes that "the BP sampling plan focuses only on workers on the large ships, and appears to not include monitoring for the people on the approximately 1,500 small fishing boats helping to clean up the spill. These people are dismissed as of 'Reduced Priority' on page 4 of the [BP sampling plan](#)." It is unclear what sort of priority BP places on Gulf coast residents.

<b>L</b> <b>O</b> <b>W</b>	0 - 10 ppm	Irritation of the eyes, nose and throat
<b>M</b> <b>O</b> <b>D</b>	10 - 50 ppm	Headache Dizziness Nausea and vomiting Coughing and breathing difficulty
<b>H</b> <b>I</b> <b>G</b> <b>H</b>	50 - 200 ppm	Severe respiratory tract irritation Eye irritation / acute conjunctivitis Shock Convulsions Coma Death in severe cases

Physical reactions to exposure to Hydrogen Sulfide by amount. Source: Hydrogen Sulfide Safety Fact Sheet, [SafetyDirectory.com](http://SafetyDirectory.com).

These reports suggest that the gravest threat to Gulf residents from the BP oil disaster may be lurking unseen, in the air. There have been [rumors](#), [reports](#) and [talk](#) of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) developing plans to evacuate the Gulf coast for up to 200 miles inland if the air becomes too toxic to breathe. While that would obviously be a worst-case scenario, if it is true that the government is even considering that possibility, then that also may be cause for alarm.

For the time-being, state health agencies are advising people having any of the

mentioned symptoms to stay indoors and ventilate their homes with air conditioning. Gulf states including Mississippi and Florida have also recommended that residents stay out of water where they are able to see or smell oil. Alabama and Louisiana have issued swimming advisories, discouraging people from swimming in gulf waters, according to their respective state health departments.

#### For more info:

[The Institute for Southern Studies](#)

[WWLTV](#)

[CBS News](#)

[CNN](#)

[Times-Picayune \(NOLA.com\)](#)

[Louisiana Environmental Action Network](#)

[BP](#)

[Safety Directory](#)

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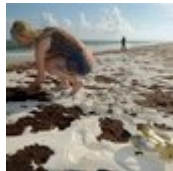
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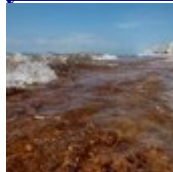


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