This fact sheet has been developed to provide information on the progress of the epidemiological component of the Gaythorne and Newstead asbestos investigation. Epidemiology is a scientific field that is concerned with understanding the patterns of disease in the population.

A considerable amount of insight and information on the sites’ histories, including potential historical community exposure, has been provided to the investigation since its establishment in November 2014.

The information provided by the community has been vital in the advancement of the investigation.

**Epidemiology update**

**Mesothelioma notifications**

Data from the Queensland Cancer Registry relating to patients diagnosed with mesothelioma for the period 1986 to 2013 showed a slightly higher number of cases in the vicinity of the former Wunderlich asbestos factory site at Gaythorne and the former James Hardie site at Newstead, compared to the state-wide average.

The main cause of mesothelioma is known to be workplace exposure to asbestos or exposure through living with an asbestos factory worker. Our epidemiological study has focused on areas close to the Gaythorne and Newstead factory sites. Although detailed information regarding the work history of the mesothelioma cases was not available, it is reasonable to assume that the cases that were identified would include factory workers and their families who lived close to the factories. This is supported by information provided by community members. Therefore, an increase in mesothelioma in these areas is consistent with what would be expected.

A recent epidemiological study undertaken by Victoria Health into a Wunderlich site in Sunshine, Melbourne had a similar outcome.

Asbestos exposure resulting from living near to an active asbestos factory has been shown to contribute to mesothelioma risk, but the extent of the increased risk is not known. In particular, case reports and previous studies have shown that children who played in piles of asbestos factory waste may be at increased risk of developing mesothelioma. Again, the extent of the increase in risk is not known.

It is important to note that mesothelioma takes many years to develop. For this reason, an increase in mesothelioma in an area does not imply that there is an ongoing, present day risk to the current residents’ health.
Current community health risk

Asbestos in the air/roof cavities

In a pilot program, houses within 500 metres of the former Wunderlich site in Gaythorne were tested for airborne asbestos, because asbestos only causes harm when there are airborne fibres of a size that can be inhaled. Several outdoor areas were also tested.

Expert independent analysis of the samples was undertaken and results were released in January 2015. No airborne asbestos was detected in any of the houses or outdoor areas tested.

On this basis, it has been concluded there is no increased health risk to the occupants of the tested houses as a result of their proximity to the former Wunderlich asbestos factory site.

In the coming weeks, further houses will be tested to validate the pilot results.

About the epidemiology study

The epidemiological study highlighted the challenges in studying mesothelioma incidence, particularly due to the long period between exposure to asbestos and the development of mesothelioma, the length of time since the factories finished operating and a lack of information about patients.

People who developed mesothelioma due to past exposure to asbestos in the Gaythorne and Newstead areas and subsequently moved away prior to their diagnosis cannot be included in this analysis of Gaythorne and Newstead cases, because the Queensland Cancer Registry records the patient’s address at the time of diagnosis and does not record information regarding patients’ sources of asbestos exposure.

Information provided by community members, and from local doctors, has identified a small number of patients who did not live in the vicinity of the sites at time of their diagnosis, but who had lived near the asbestos factory when it was operating. As such they may have been exposed to asbestos from the factories at this time.

Health concerns

Current or former residents concerned about their health should call 13 HEALTH (13 432584) or consult their local GP.

More information

Further information including other outcomes of the investigation to date, fact sheets and FAQ pages can be found at www.health.qld.gov.au/asbestos.