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DuPont plant linked to cancer

Company to look into high W.Va. rates; other plants blacked out in report

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DuPont Co. plans to investigate a possible cancer cluster at the company's Washington Works plant in West Virginia, based on company data that show an abnormally high rate for a rare type of cancer among plant workers.

In all, the company found 19 cases of carcinoid tumors among workers at 12 current or former DuPont plants, with six cases found among workers at Washington Works, according to a report filed by DuPont with the Environmental Protection Agency in December.

The names of the other plants where carcinoid tumors were found in workers were blacked out in the report. Current or former DuPont plants in the area include the Chambers Works plant in Deepwater, N.J.; the Edge Moor pigment plant; and the nylon plant in Seaford, which DuPont sold in 2004 to Invista.

Carcinoid tumors are slow-growing tumors that tend to afflict the respiratory and digestive systems. The tumors are rare, accounting for only about half a percent of all malignancies. According to Delaware Cancer Registry records, 155 state residents were found to have a similar type of carcinoid cancers between 1996 and 2000.

"The rarity of the diagnosis paired with the occurrence of multiple cases at one plant site ... provides preliminary evidence for a cancer cluster," the DuPont report states. No other plant reported more than two carcinoid tumor cases, according to the report.

The annual U.S. incidence rate for carcinoid tumors is 3.8 cases per 100,000 persons. The comparable rate for the West Virginia facility would be 7.3 cases per 100,000 workers.

The Washington Works plant, which manufactures hundreds of products for the auto industry, has become a battleground over perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA, a chemical used to make the nonstick coating Teflon.

PFOA is a "likely" cancer-causing agent in humans according to the EPA's internal guidelines, an EPA spokesman said Monday.

A 2005 DuPont study found no link between PFOA and cancer in its most exposed workers, and the company says "the weight of evidence indicates that PFOA exposure does not pose a health risk to the general public."

Morel Symons, supervisor of DuPont's epidemiology program and the study's lead researcher, said the company hoped to have a report completed by the end of the year that assesses the effect of workplace exposures on cancer risk at the West Virginia plant. No studies will be conducted at the other plants.

"At this point, we don't have any reason to believe it's attributable to any specific chemical," Symons said.

For Ken Wamsley, there's little question as to the connection between PFOA and cancer. The Vienna, W.Va., resident and former Washington Works employee said he's seen a number of his

friends and co-workers in the Teflon unit die of cancer.

The former lab analyst worked 39 years at the plant, including 27 years working with PFOA, also known as C8. He retired in 2001 -- just before being diagnosed with colon cancer.

Wamsley, who said he "probably tested more C8s than anyone else," had to have his rectum and part of his colon removed because of the cancer.

"If it was a carcinogen, we should have been warned," Wamsley said. "We used to test that stuff out without a [protective] hood."

According to DuPont's report, first reported Sunday by the Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette, five of the six afflicted Washington Works employees spent time working in the plant's research and technical laboratories, where they would have had an increased likelihood of handling organic solvents, which one published study found to be associated with carcinoid tumors.

Symons said DuPont's study was prompted by reports of carcinoid tumors in the appendices of two Washington Works employees in 2006.

The company examined an internal cancer registry it has maintained since 1956, finding an additional 14 cases of confirmed carcinoid tumors among DuPont workers, along with 99 "probable" cases.

After filing an initial report last October that found no need for further investigation, Symons said his team learned of three additional cases of carcinoid tumors -- two at Washington Works. The six cases among 5,169 Washington Works employees listed in the cancer registry raised the possibility of a cancer cluster at the plant, according to the report.

Symons said the names of the other plants where carcinoid tumors were recorded were excluded from the report to reduce the chances of the workers being identified and to protect "confidential business information" including the size of the work force.

In addition to the six cases at Washington Works, part of DuPont's engineering polymers business unit, cases of carcinoid tumors were also found in workers with the textile fibers unit (6), pharmaceuticals and medical products (3), chemical solutions enterprise (2), engineering (1) and atomic energy division (1).

PFOA has been a problem for DuPont at the West Virginia plant.

As part of a settlement in a lawsuit over contaminated water supplies, DuPont is financing health screenings for about 70,000 West Virginia and Ohio residents close to the Parkersburg, W.Va., plant.

West Virginia University researchers have found in preliminary results that PFOA may be associated with changes in liver and immune function, as well as higher cholesterol levels in children. PFOA has been found in the blood of humans across the world, and at elevated levels of residents who live near the Washington Works plant.

DuPont, which has committed to phase out the use of PFOA by 2015 or sooner, agreed in late 2005 to pay \$16.5 million in fines and compensatory payouts to settle EPA complaints that the company withheld information about PFOA contamination in workers and the environment near the Washington Works plant.

Symons said the cancer cluster study, which he will direct, will examine all potential workplace exposures to try to find the root causes of the possible increased cancer risk at Washington Works.

The task is made more difficult, he said, by the limitations of DuPont's cancer registry, the fact that carcinoid tumors can stay undetected for a long time and the changing incidence rate nationally for the tumors.

"In some sense, it's a moving target," Symons said.

