

Stress and Worry: A Normal Response to Potential Environmental Exposures

This fact sheet covers:

- Why potential environmental exposures are so stressful
- Psychological and emotional stress among Portland residents
- Signs that stress management assistance is needed
- What you can do to ease the stress
- Resources for you and your health care provider

It is normal to experience stress and worry if you believe you or your family may have been exposed to environmental contamination. Stress can take a toll on your quality of life and emotional and physical well-being.

Persistent stress may lead to serious health problems, such as depression, chronic anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Why are potential environmental exposures so stressful?

- *Feeling unsafe at home*
 - It is very important for people to feel safe in their homes. Potential environmental contamination near or in the home may create deep-seated feelings of anxiety and helplessness.
- *Fear for health of loved ones, especially children*
 - Parents want to protect their children from anything that may cause them harm. Exposure to contamination that parents have little or no control over may cause them to feel unable to fulfill the very important role of creating a healthy environment for their children.
- *Uncertainty*
 - The health risks from exposure to environmental contaminants over time are often difficult to define. This uncertainty makes it hard for individuals to decide how real a threat is and makes choosing protective action very difficult.
 - The invisibility of these toxic exposures contributes significantly to the uncertainty. Exposure to contaminants may result in effects years or decades later. The uncertainty of when or if there will be effects makes it more difficult for the affected individual to have a sense of closure.

- *Interpersonal conflict*
 - Different views of the problems and solutions surrounding environmental contamination in a community come about naturally. If not dealt with, these differences can create tension or conflict in a neighborhood or small community.
- *Lengthy process*
 - The process of evaluating and cleaning up an area that is contaminated can take years. For individuals who believe their family's health is at risk, waiting for this process to be completed can be very stressful.
- *Financial burden*
 - Legal fees and fear of depreciating property values may put a heavy burden on families affected by environmental contamination.

Psychological and Emotional Stress Among Portland Residents

Residents of Southeast and North Portland have expressed concern and worry over the effects that potential exposure to metals in industrial emissions, such as cadmium, arsenic and chromium. Residents who continue to experience persistent fear over time may experience chronic stress symptoms. Even though it may not be visually apparent to others, potential environmental exposures can be a traumatic event for those affected. Even after the situation has been remedied, sounds, images, and events (i.e. the wind blowing, dust, or children playing outside) may trigger a stressful reaction.

Signs that Stress Management Assistance is Needed

- Depression, sadness, and feelings of hopelessness
- Limited attention span and difficulty concentrating
- Becoming easily frustrated
- Overwhelming guilt and self-doubt
- Mood swings or crying easily
- Headaches/stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping
- Poor work performance
- Reluctance to leave home
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol

What can I do to ease the stress?

Community members potentially exposed to environmental contamination may be more concerned about reducing the risk of exposure than reducing stress. Psychological and emotional stress, however, over the long term takes a toll on a person's physical and emotional well-being as well as quality of life. There are several actions that residents can take to reduce stress:

- Tell your story: It has been found that telling your story to others reduces stress.
- Get organized and involved in the clean-up process: knowledge is power. This can give you a greater sense of control.
- Find out who in your neighborhood is concerned and start meeting.
- Take steps to promote your own physical and emotional health by staying active in your daily life patterns or by adjusting them. A healthful approach to life (e.g. healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation, avoiding smoking) will help both you and your family.
- **See your doctor if signs of stress persist.**

Resources for you and your health care provider

- ATSDR's Report of the Expert Panel Workshop on the Psychological Responses to Hazardous Substances:
www.atsdr.cdc.gov/HEC/PRHS/psych5ed.pdf
- National Institute of Mental Health:
www.nimh.nih.gov
- Coping Tips for Disasters and Traumatic Events:
www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/coping-tips