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Ozone and particle pollution are the most widespread air pollutants—and among the most dangerous. Recent research has revealed new insights into how they can harm the body—including taking the lives of infants and altering the lungs of children. All in all, the evidence shows that the risks are greater than we once thought.

What Is Ozone?

Ozone (O₃) is an extremely reactive gas molecule composed of three oxygen atoms. It is the primary ingredient of smog air pollution and is very harmful to breathe. Ozone attacks lung tissue by reacting with it chemically.

News about ozone can be confusing. Some days you hear that ozone levels are too high and other days that we need to prevent ozone depletion. Basically, the ozone layer found high in the upper atmosphere (the stratosphere) is beneficial because it shields us from much of the sun's ultraviolet radiation. However, ozone air pollution at ground level where we can breathe it (in the troposphere) is harmful. It causes serious health problems.

Where Does Ozone Come From?

What you see coming out of the tailpipe on a car or a truck isn't ozone, but the raw ingredients for making ozone. Ozone is formed by chemical reactions in the atmosphere from two raw gases that do come out of tailpipes, smokestacks and many other sources. These essential raw ingredients for ozone are nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and hydrocarbons, also called volatile organic compounds (VOCs). They are produced primarily when fossil fuels like gasoline, oil or coal are burned or when some chemicals, like paints, evaporate. When NO_x and VOCs come in contact with both heat and sunlight, they combine and form ozone smog. NO_x is emitted from power plants, motor vehicles and other sources of high-heat combustion. VOCs are emitted from motor vehicles, chemical plants, refineries, factories, gas stations, paint and other sources. The formula for ozone is simple, and like any formula, the ingredients must all be present and in the right proportions to make the final product:

NO_x + VOC + Heat + Sunlight = Ozone

You may have wondered why "ozone action day" warnings are sometimes followed by recommendations to avoid activities such as mowing your lawn or refilling your gas tank during daylight hours. Lawn mower exhaust and gasoline vapors are VOCs that could turn into ozone in the heat and sun. Take away the sunlight and ozone doesn't form, so refilling your gas tank after dark is better on high ozone days. Since we can't control sunlight and heat, we must reduce the chemical raw ingredients if we want to reduce ozone.

Who is at Risk from Breathing Ozone?

Five groups of people are especially vulnerable to the effects of breathing ozone:

- children and teens •
- anyone 65 and older•
- people who work or exercise outdoors•
- people with existing lung diseases, such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (also known as COPD, which includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis)
- "responders" who are otherwise healthy but for some reason react more strongly to ozone.

The impact on your health can depend on many factors, however, not just whether you are part of one of these groups. For example, the risks would be greater if ozone levels are higher, if you are breathing faster because you're working outdoors or if you spend more time outdoors.

How Ozone Pollution Harms Your Health

Scientists have studied the effects of ozone on health for decades. Hundreds of research studies have confirmed that ozone harms people at levels currently found in the United States. In the last few years, we've learned that it can also be deadly.

Breathing ozone may shorten your life. Strong evidence arrived late in 2004, when two large multi-city investigations documented that short-term exposure to ozone can shorten lives, building on numerous earlier studies. One of them looked at 95 cities across the United States over a 14-year period. That study compared the impact of ozone on death patterns during several days after the ozone measurements. Even on days when ozone levels were low, the researchers found that the risk of premature death increased with higher levels of ozone. They estimated that over 3,700 deaths annually could be attributed to a 10-parts-per-billion increase in ozone levels.¹ Another study, published the same week, looked at 23 European cities and found similar effects on mortality from short-term exposure to ozone.²

Confirmation came in the summer of 2005. Three groups of researchers working independently reviewed and analyzed the research around deaths associated with short-term exposures to ozone. The three teams—at Harvard, Johns Hopkins and New York University—used different approaches but all came to similar conclusions. All three studies report a small, but robust association between daily ozone levels and increased deaths.³ Writing a commentary on these reviews, David Bates, MD, explained how these premature deaths could occur:

“Ozone is capable of causing inflammation in the lung at lower concentrations than any other gas. Such an effect would be a hazard to anyone with heart failure and pulmonary congestion, and would worsen the function of anyone with advanced lung disease.”⁴

Other immediate risks from breathing high levels of ozone. Many areas in the United States produce enough ground-level ozone during the summer months to cause health problems that can be felt right away. Immediate problems—in addition to increased risk of premature death—include:

- shortness of breath;
- chest pain when inhaling;
- wheezing and coughing;
- asthma attacks;
- increased susceptibility to respiratory infections;
- pulmonary inflammation; and
- increased need for people with lung diseases, like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), to receive medical treatment and to go to the hospital.⁵

Breathing ozone for longer periods can alter the lungs’ ability to function. Two studies published in 2005 explored ozone’s ability to reduce the lung’s ability to work efficiently, a term called “lung function.” Each study looked at otherwise healthy groups who were exposed to ozone for long periods: outdoor postal workers in Taiwan and college freshmen who were lifelong residents of Los Angeles or the San Francisco Bay area. Both studies found that the long exposure to elevated ozone levels had decreased their lung function.⁶

Other effects of long-term exposure to ozone. Short-term exposure to ozone also appears to worsen COPD.⁷ Repeated inflammation due to exposure to ozone over a period of years can lead to a chronic “stiffening” of the lungs.

Inhaling ozone may affect the heart as well as the lungs. One new study linked exposures to high ozone levels for as little as one hour to a particular type of cardiac arrhythmia that itself increases the risk of premature death and stroke.⁸ A French study found that exposure to elevated ozone levels for one to two days increased the risk of heart attacks for middle-aged adults without heart disease.⁹

Breathing other pollutants in the air may make your lungs more responsive to ozone—and breathing ozone may increase your body’s response to other pollutants. For example, research warns that breathing sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide—two pollutants common in the eastern United States—can make the lungs react more strongly than to just breathing ozone alone. Breathing ozone may also increase the response to allergens in people with allergies.¹⁰

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