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New study links C8 exposure with menopause

By Keri Brown

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March 25, 2011 · West Virginia University researchers have released a new report that focuses on women's exposure to the chemical C8. Dupont has been using the chemical at its Washington Work's plant near Parkersburg since the 1950's.

In 2001, Parkersburg-area residents sued the Dupont Company over its disposal of a chemical called C8 into their water supplies. A more than \$100 million class-action settlement resulted in medical monitoring of residents.

Blood samples and information were collected from more than 60,000 people. The data-base is being used to study the possible impacts of the chemical on human health.

West Virginia University researchers say women exposed to higher levels of the toxic chemical C8 were more likely to have experienced early menopause.

"In women 42, the probability of having experienced menopause is much higher if women have higher levels of perfluorocarbons. The higher the perfluorocarbon levels the earlier, the more likely they were to have experienced menopause and you can get menopause that early for smoking but I controlled for that. I controlled for age as well and what I found even after doing that was this association between early menopause and higher perfluorocarbon levels," said Sarah Knox, author of the study and professor of Epidemiology at the WVU School of Medicine.

The report is the largest of its kind to study the effects of chemicals disrupting human hormonal systems.

As part of the C8 Health Study, researchers looked at blood samples and information of nearly 26,000 women aged 18 to 65 who live in water districts near Dupont's Parkersburg plant.

C8, is also known as perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA. It is one of the family of chemicals known as PFCs.

Dupont has been using the chemical at its Washington Works plant near Parkersburg since the 1950's. For years, the company dumped the chemical in the Ohio River. It is also released into the environment by air.

The synthetic chemical is used to make Teflon, non-stick and stain resistant products and clothing, including microwave popcorn and fast-food wrappers. Studies have found traces of the chemical in other food items like butter, poultry and roast beef.

According to the Environmental Working Group, the chemical is in the blood of more than 90 percent of the U.S. population.

WVU's Knox said the study also finds inverse associations between of perfluorocarbons and estrogen in the blood.

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"The farther away they were from the Dupont plant or from the water source the less they had however in PFOS. The other chemical, they were the same in the regular population so what that means is the exposure is not coming so much from the drinking water in PFOS, it is coming from carpets and clothes and furniture and linings of food products and fire retardant clothing so that is what is a little scary about all of this," said Knox.

The U.S. Department of Environmental Protection says C8 may cause cancer. Other studies say the chemical is linked to birth defects and thyroid disease.

Dupont maintains there are no known human health effects related to C8 and no risk to the general public.

As part of a class action lawsuit, the company installed water filtration systems at several water districts in Ohio and West Virginia and has reduced the C8 levels emitted into the air and water from its Washington Works plant.

Knox said the study also raises concerns about increased levels of cholesterol and cardiovascular risks for women.

"If menopause is causing a rise in perfluorocarbons what that means is these toxicants are accumulating in women who don't menstruate and they cause increases in cholesterol, which is also a cardiovascular risk factor. Data in animals has shown immunotoxic effects and the other thing, which we didn't say in this article but which is true is what happens to pregnant women who don't menstruate either so what is happening to them and what is happening to their babies," said Knox.

The menopause study was published last week by the Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism.

Knox said WVU researchers will release another study later this year on C8 chemical exposure on the thyroid and kidneys.