

NEWS

Toxic chemical problems that forced evacuations in Milwaukee reflect massive national problem

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For Tonya Hill, an early morning door knock from a Milwaukee health official was the first time she had heard of the toxic carcinogen trichloroethylene, or TCE.

Now, Hill is one of more than 250 residents evacuated from two Milwaukee-area apartment complexes due to unsafe levels of toxins lingering from the sites' industrial legacy.

None of the tenants — many of whom experienced short-term symptoms of exposure like headaches, rashes, nausea and confusion — appear to have heard of the chemical.

Hill had symptoms all over her body, and both she and her daughter experienced rashes, nausea and trouble focusing.

“I kept having to go to the hospital,” Hill said. “When my doctor heard about the TCE, he said that could explain what was happening to me.”

While the evacuations that have taken place this year are unprecedented for the state, residents of Community within the Corridor in Milwaukee and Lydell Apartments in Glendale are only a sliver of the tens of millions of Americans who have been poisoned from TCE contamination.

More: Two apartment complexes have been evacuated because of a carcinogen this year. Here's what we know

“TCE is everywhere,” said Ray Dorsey, a neurology professor at the University of Rochester Medical Center. “There are kids in virtually every state in the country right now who are breathing in TCE.”

More: Where are the TCE cleanup sites in Milwaukee County?

The chemical can be found in half of all of the Environmental Protection Agency's monitored contamination sites and up to one-third of the country's groundwater.

In Milwaukee County alone, there are 832 sites with historical TCE contamination — 261 of these sites are still being cleaned up. The other sites have been closed, meaning cleanup for now has been completed, but the the TCE is not necessarily all gone.

Some states have partially banned TCE use

Usage of TCE peaked in the 1980s, with production and use hitting 830 million pounds per year according to the National Institutes of Health. In 2020, the EPA estimated that 250 million pounds of the chemical was still used annually with more than 2 million pounds being released into the environment through such things as emissions and runoff .

Some states have moved to partially ban TCE use. Both Minnesota and New York banned the chemical's use in some commercial and industrial settings. The European Union has banned commercial usage as well.

However, contamination left behind by military operations, factories, dry cleaners and other industrial operations is a lingering problem.

Environmental Working Group Senior Scientist Tasha Stoiber, who worked at a Madison-based engineering firm early in her career, described the events at the Milwaukee area apartment complexes as “a huge failure,” emblematic of larger gaps in regulations across the nation.

“We are way behind in regulating the necessary contaminants,” Stoiber said.

Nationally, contamination at military base Camp Lejeune has been linked to long-term health effects, prompting a federal law change for veterans seeking compensation for damages.

More: What to know about carcinogen TCE that caused two Milwaukee apartment evacuations

Regulatory process is slow, way behind

Hill, who lived in Community within the Corridor in Milwaukee, was incredulous that developers failed to complete the state-recommended testing for TCE before moving

residents in. The developer of Lydell Apartments on the Bayshore Mall campus failed in the same way.

“How could they have let this happen,” Hill said. “How could we live in a contaminated place for so long and no one told us.”

According to Dorsey, the University of Rochester neurologist, regulators “have had their heads in the sand” when policing carcinogens like TCE.

Lindsay McCormick is a manager at the Environmental Defense Fund, which advocates nationally for stricter regulations on toxic chemicals like TCE and PFAS.

“The regulatory process of the federal government and EPA is an extremely slow-moving one,” McCormick said. “It takes a long time after knowing that something is causing harm for regulation to actually happen.”

“TCE is a prime example of that,” she added.

In Wisconsin, Republicans have recently removed provisions of the state budget that would have dedicated nearly \$10 million to cleaning up historically contaminated sites such as the complexes that health officials needed to evacuate.

On the federal level, regulators are focusing on limiting current TCE usage. While the federal Superfund system works to address contaminated sites, scientists contend there is still much research, testing and cleanup to be done to address historical TCE contamination.

“This is the tip of an enormous iceberg,” Dorsey said. “And we’re not doing anything about it.”