



# CANCER

## CANCER FACTS IN BLACK AND WHITE AND GREEN

### The Truth about African American Health and Pollution

The National Black Environmental Justice Network (NBEJN] wants you to know there is a connection between many of the chronic illnesses affecting our communities - such as asthma, lead poisoning and cancer - and our exposure to pollution. Numerous research studies have tied air pollution to asthma attacks, cardiovascular and respiratory illness, cancer, birth defects, and even death.<sup>1</sup> The message from research is that most of the cases of cancer are linked to the environment, and in principle, can be prevented.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1**

**Health Effects - Selected Hazardous Air Pollutants**

Pollutant	Carcinogen	Lungs	Other Organs
Carbon Monoxide		X	X
Lead	X	X	X
Nitrogen Oxide		X	X
Ozone		X	X
Particulate Matter	X	X	X
Sulfur Dioxide		X	X
VOCs	X	X	X
PAHs	X	X	X
Diesel Emissions	X	X	X
Coke Oven Emissions	X	X	X
Benzene	X	X	X

A few air pollutants, Carbon Monoxide (CO), Lead (Pb), Nitrogen Dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>), Ozone (O<sub>3</sub>), Particulate Matter (PM), and Sulfur Dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) called Criteria Air Pollutants, are common throughout the United States. VOCs = volatile organic compounds, such as benzene. PAHs = polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, such as Benzo(a)pyrene.

Source: Environmental Defense Chemical Scorecard ([www.scorecard.org](http://www.scorecard.org))

Ethnic and minority groups (African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Indigenous peoples) and the poor suffer unusually high levels of morbidity and mortality at every stage of life. These groups are burdened with a disproportionately high share of residential and occupational exposure to environmental pollution.<sup>3</sup> Government agencies and industries overwhelmingly locate polluting facilities in communities of color and engage in hazardous and unsustainable development, over the protests of residents and in disregard of safer and more environmentally protective alternatives.

Consequently, the people who live in these communities are inundated with significant environmental and health hazards related to toxic waste sites, mining operations, incinerators, oil exploration, and other harmful developments. In the United

States, approximately 60% of African Americans live in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites. Three (3) out of five (5) of the largest hazardous waste landfills in the United States are located in predominantly African American or Latino communities.<sup>4</sup> As a consequence, people of color have a higher incidence of cancer, lead poisoning, respiratory illnesses and a host of other serious and fatal environmentally-related health problems.

Unfortunately, the medical establishment and the existing public health paradigm do not emphasize the association of pollution. In an effort to combat these realities, NBEJN has launched the Healthy and Safe Communities Campaign to raise awareness, advance public policy initiatives and build the capacity of African American organizations to fight for our health and the health of our children, families, and neighborhoods.

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## Cancer in the U.S.

- Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the United States.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2005, an estimated 570,280 Americans – or more than 1,500 people a day – will die of cancer.<sup>6</sup>
- Approximately 19.9 million new cases of cancer have been diagnosed since 1990, and about 1.4 million new cases will be diagnosed in 2005 alone.<sup>7</sup>
- African American men are more than 140% more likely to die from cancer than White men.<sup>14</sup>
- More White women are stricken with breast cancer than Black women, yet Black women are 28% more likely to die from the disease than White women.<sup>15</sup>
- The overall cancer “cure rate,” as measured by survival for over five years following the diagnosis, is currently 50% for Whites but only 35% for Blacks.<sup>16</sup>

## The Cancer Epidemic in Black America

- Cancer is not an equal opportunity killer.<sup>8</sup>
- African Americans are more likely to develop and die of cancer than persons of any other racial and ethnic group. During 1992-1999, the average annual incidence rate per 100,000 for all cancer sites was 526.6 for African Americans, 480.4 for whites, 348.6 for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 329.6 in Hispanics, and 244.6 in American Indians/Alaska Natives.<sup>9</sup>
- African Americans are more likely to die of cancer than any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S. The average annual death rate from 1997-2001 for all cancers combined was 253 per 100,000 for blacks, 200 for whites, 137 for Hispanic Americans, 135 for American Indians/Alaska Natives, and 122 for Asians/Pacific Islanders.<sup>10</sup>
- Cancer kills more African American children than White children. Cancer is surpassed only by accidents and homicides as the number one killer of African American children.<sup>11</sup>
- While cancer mortality rates for all races combined declined 2.4% each year between 1990 and 1995, the decline for Black children (0.5%) was significantly less than the decline for White children (3.0%).<sup>12</sup>
- African American men have the highest cancer rates of prostate, lung, colon, oral cavity and stomach cancer.<sup>13</sup>
- Cancers among African Americans are more frequently diagnosed after the cancer has metastasized and spread to regional or distant sites.<sup>17</sup>
- Minorities with cancer often suffer more pain due to under-medication. Nearly 62% of patients at institutions serving predominantly African American patients were not prescribed adequate analgesics.<sup>18</sup>

## Pollution and Cancer in Black America

- Many low-income, minority communities are located in close proximity to chemical and industrial settings where toxic waste is generated. These include chemical waste disposal sites, fossil-fuel power plants, municipal incinerators, and solid waste landfills.<sup>19</sup>
- African Americans and other socio-economically disadvantaged populations are more likely to live in the most hazardous environments and to work in the most hazardous occupations.<sup>20</sup>
- Inner city Black neighborhoods are overburdened with pollution from diesel buses. In a 2002 report EPA, researchers concluded that long-term (i.e. chronic inhalation exposure to diesel engine exhaust (DE) is likely to pose a lung cancer hazard to humans, as well as damage the lung in other ways, depending on exposure.<sup>21</sup>
- Factors contributing to the high incidence of cancer in Blacks are varied. While behavioral and lifestyle factors, nutrition, and access to health care services are important environmental exposures, over which these

individuals have little control, are likely to play a prominent role in increased morbidity and mortality among socio-economically disadvantaged populations.<sup>22</sup>

- There is a strong relationship between environmental exposure and lung cancer among African Americans, which accounts for the largest number of cancer deaths among both men-30%, and women-21%.<sup>23</sup>
- A study in the March 2002 Journal of the American Medical Association found people living in the most polluted metropolitan areas have a 12% increased risk of dying from lung cancer compared to people living in the least polluted areas.<sup>24</sup>
- Smoking does not explain why lung cancer is responsible for the most cancer deaths among African Americans. While Black men identify themselves as current smokers, they typically have smoked less and started smoking later in life than white men.<sup>25</sup>
- Rates are higher in urban areas because of increased air pollution and increased particulate matter in the air.<sup>26</sup>
- Occupational exposure to industrial carcinogens has clearly emerged as a major risk factor for cancer.<sup>27</sup>
- Four percent (4%) of all cancer deaths in the U. S. are thought to be related to exposures in the workplace.<sup>28</sup>
- Minority workers are at a higher health risk from occupational exposure to environmental contaminants.<sup>29</sup>

- Lower-paid factory and production workers are more frequently exposed to inhaled industrial toxins.<sup>30</sup>
- African American men are twice as likely to have increased cancer incidence from occupational exposure as White men.<sup>31</sup>

### Ending the Epidemic

- Stop blaming the victim! The “blame the victim” theory of cancer causation emphasizes faulty lifestyle and genetic susceptibility and diverts attention from the fact that blacks work in the dirtiest, most hazardous jobs, and live in the most polluted communities.<sup>32</sup>
- Research must examine the relationship between toxic exposure and cancer in African Americans. Tracking chronic diseases like cancer and environmental exposures that also link to hazard data is the first step to preventing chronic disease and saving lives in this country.<sup>33</sup>
- Stop the government policy of “let’s wait and see!” According to Dr. Samuel Epstein, “belated government efforts to control polluting industries have generally been neutralized by well-organized and well-financed opposition.” Industry challenged in lengthy court battles, during which time industry still had the right to maintain production and exposure of people to suspect materials.<sup>34</sup>

**Remove African Americans from harm’s way. Polluters should be held accountable for cleaning up polluted African American communities that have life-threatening levels of cancer-causing pollutants.**

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**Work with us!** For more information on the National Black Environmental Justice Network and the Healthy and Safe Communities Campaign, contact:

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