

2 plants in Houston area in survey for rare cancer

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Two chemical plants in the Houston area will be checked by federal health investigators for possible cases of a rare liver cancer among plant workers.

The cancer apparently is caused by years-long exposure to vinyl chloride, a gas used in making polyvinyl

chloride (PVC) plastics.

Teams from the National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety will visit the Diamond Shamrock Chemical Co. plant in Deer Park and the Union Carbide Corp. plant at Texas City later this month, an NIOSH spokesman said Tuesday in Washington.

The institute launched a nationwide emergency survey of eight plants that either make

or use vinyl chloride after the discovery recently of several deaths among workers at a vinyl chloride plant in Louisville, Ky.

Officials of the B. F. Goodrich plant at Louisville detected the previously unsuspected occupational hazard and alerted the federal Occupational Safety and Health

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Administration (OSHA) to the cancer.

Five deaths and two additional cases of cancer have now been confirmed among workers at the Louisville plant.

As the alarm spread, single deaths from the cancer were belatedly verified from autopsy slides at a Goodyear plant in Niagara, N.Y., and a Union Carbide plant at South Charleston, W. Va.

"This cancer is so rare that two cases in one place is an epidemic," the NIOSH spokesman said. "Our statisticians project that there should be only 21 deaths a year from it in the entire country."

The cancer, angiosarcoma, often apparently goes undetected at the time of death because of its rarity, the spokesman said.

Nationally, according to a NIOSH survey, there are 14 plants producing vinyl chloride and another 23 using it. These include several plants in the Houston area.

But NIOSH is including only eight plants in its initial check in order to get a quick reading of the possible hazard.

While awaiting the NIOSH investigators, spokesmen for Diamond Shamrock and Union Carbide said those plants are reviewing the medical records of employees and giving blood tests in some cases in a search for any cancer cases.

Both plants reported they had found no indications so far of any cancer cases here.

"We have always tried to hold the exposure to our workers at 50 parts per million of vinyl chloride," said Dale Wegrich, Diamond Shamrock plant manager, "even though the federal

standard has been 500."

Union Carbide said in a statement it had checked the medical records of 723 employees and former employees who have worked with vinyl chloride and found only the one cancer case at its West Virginia plant.

That employee died in 1968 after working in vinyl chloride polymerization from 1944 to 1962, the company said.

The stricken workers at the Goodrich plant in Louisville had all worked with vinyl chloride at least 14 years.

Vinyl chloride, a gas, is used to make polyvinyl chloride, a powder, which in turn is used to manufacture such plastic products as food containers, phonograph records, and water hose and pipe.

Union Carbide said it knows of no health hazard to workers using vinyl chloride resins to make finished products, or to the users of those products.

Neither is there any known danger to residents living in the vicinity of vinyl chloride plants.

The findings of NIOSH, a research arm of OSHA, will be used in setting new federal limits on worker exposure to vinyl chloride, and possibly to declare vinyl chloride a carcinogen, or cancer-causing agent.

An OSHA spokesman said there appears to be no real doubt that vinyl chloride is a cancer danger, although some scientists feel a second, unknown chemical may also be involved.

The Goodrich plant, where five workers died between 1964 and last December, was in compliance with present federal exposure limits of 500 ppm.

"If vinyl chloride is declared a carcinogen," the NIOSH spokesman said, "we will have to go a lot lower than 50 ppm as an exposure limit."