

The Brussels Times

Monday, 09 November, 2020

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Former Opel site in Antwerp is polluted with toxic 'forever chemicals'

Friday, 14 August 2020



The Opel plant in Antwerp, before site clearance. © Opel

The Flemish waste management agency Ovam has started cleaning up the site of the former Opel car factory in Antwerp, after the discovery of the presence in the soil of the toxic chemical PFAS.

PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, is a name denoting any one of a large number of man-made chemicals that do not occur in nature, and are used for a wide variety of industrial applications.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has identified over 4,000 types of PFAS. The chemicals have good water-grease and dirt-repelling features, and so have many applications, including lubricants, packaging, non-stick coatings, clothing, textiles and cosmetics.

However they are also toxic, and difficult to remove once they leak into the environment, which is why they are known as 'forever chemicals' – once they enter the environment, they are very difficult to remove.

According to the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, PFAS are widely present in the soil, surface water (and drinking water that comes from surface water) and dredging sludge.

At the Opel site the problem arose when a tank containing fire-fighting foam – another common use for PFAS – leaked the chemicals into the topsoil and groundwater.

According to samples taken by Ovam, the levels in the water were measured at 470 micrograms, where the permitted level is one microgram. In the soil, meanwhile, the level of the closely-related PFOS was found to be 2,400 micrograms per kilo of soil, compared to a

Former Opel site in Antwerp is polluted with toxic 'forever chemicals' was found to be 2,400 micrograms per kilo of soil, compared to a permitted level of 100 micrograms.

"This is a severe contamination of the site," Leuven university toxicologist Jan Tytgat told De Standaard.

"Are there serious risks for people and the environment? That has not been proven on an acute level, but it has been proven over the longer term, from months to years of exposure. Foetal developmental disorders have been reported, as well as hormonal disruptions in child to adolescent growth, with a risk of cancer, liver damage and immunological problems."

The clean-up operation will be charged to the former owners of the site, General Motors.

When the company closed the factory in 2010, the Port Authority of Antwerp offered to buy, but the two could not agree on a price. In the end, GM sold for €1.8 million less than its asking price of €43.6 million, when the Port Authority took on the responsibility for site cleaning.

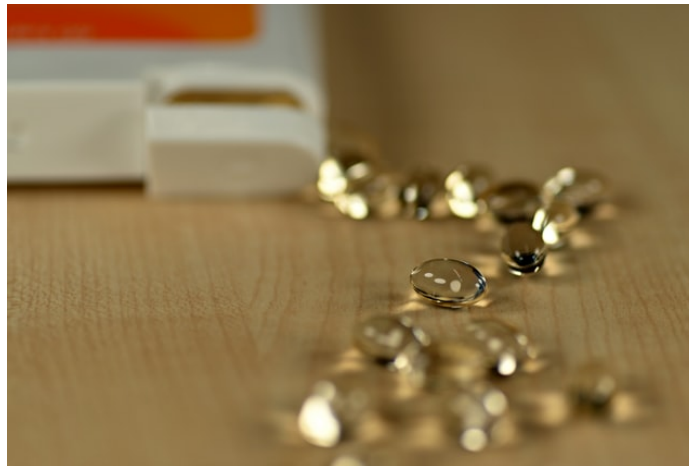
But that was before the discovery of large concentrations of forever chemicals. The bill will now be sent to the Detroit-based car manufacturer. How GM will respond, however, remains to be seen.

Alan Hope
The Brussels Times

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Belgian researchers link vitamin D deficiency to serious cases of Covid-19

Monday, 09 November 2020



Credit: Stock image

Researchers in a Belgian hospital have found a "clear" link between vitamin D deficiency and serious cases of Covid-19.

A study of 186 coronavirus patients at the AZ Delta general hospital in Roeselare, West Flanders, revealed that a lack of sufficient vitamin D on admission can be linked to increased risk of severity and death from a Covid-19 infection.

"This is independent of conditions related to vitamin D such as chronic lung disease, cardiovascular disease and diabetes," the hospital said in a short [online statement](#).

The biologists leading the study said that results which are set to be published on 20 November will further show that almost half of a pool of 16,274 patients were vitamin D deficient and that “male Covid-19 patients, in particular, showed severe vitamin D deficiencies.”

Vitamin D stimulates the absorption of nutrients such as calcium and magnesium and strengthens and regulates the immune system.

Previous studies on its immune properties have found that vitamin D deficiency is linked to increased risk of severity of other viral infections, [such as HIV](#).

Biologists leading the study said that further data was needed in order to establish whether there was a direct causal relationship, saying that this would take the form of a “major study” in which researchers would observe if vitamin D can prevent a serious Covid-19 infection.

“In the meantime, the clinical biologists of AZ Delta are drawing attention to the avoidance of vitamin D deficiencies as prevention against severe COVID-19,” they said.

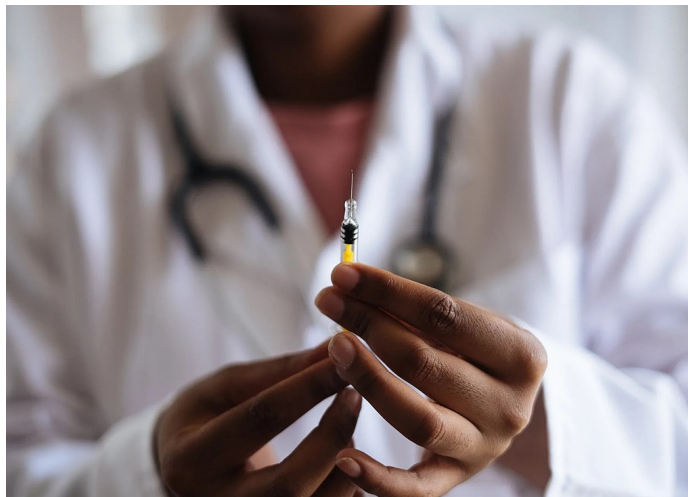
The study was accepted for publication in the American Journal of Clinical Pathology.

Gabriela Galindo
The Brussels Times

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Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine is 90% effective, early analysis shows

Monday, 09 November 2020



Credit: Retha Ferguson/Wikimedia

On Monday, pharmaceutical company Pfizer Inc announced that its candidate coronavirus vaccine is more than 90% effective in preventing Covid-19, according to interim analysis data.

Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech are the first to be able to present successful results after a large-scale clinical study. According to the companies, no serious side effects occurred during the study, they said in a [joint press release](#).

The US's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has said it would expect [at least 50% efficacy](#) from any coronavirus vaccine. Pfizer's candidate vaccine, however, with 90% efficacy, is clearly doing better than what many experts had hoped for.

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This vaccine efficacy was measured by comparing the number of infected participants who had received the vaccine, and those in the group who had received a placebo, seven days after the second dose and 28 days after the first.

This means that protection is achieved 28 days after the initiation of the vaccination, which consists of a 2-dose schedule, they added. The company hopes to deliver 100 million doses by the end of 2020, which should be 1.3 billion by the end of 2021.

In the second half of November, Pfizer intends to use an emergency procedure to request permission for rapid production of the vaccine in the US.


Pfizer Inc. 
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UPDATE: We are proud to announce, along with [@BioNTech_Group](#), that our mRNA-based [#vaccine](#) candidate has, at an interim analysis, demonstrated initial evidence of efficacy against [#COVID19](#) in participants without prior evidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection.

First Primary Efficacy Endpoint Achieved in Interim Analysis

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“Today is a great day for science and humanity,” said Dr. Albert Bourla, Pfizer Chairman and CEO, calling the early results a “critical milestone in our vaccine development program at a time when the world needs it most.”

On Wednesday 4 November, the head of the vaccine trials at the University of Oxford, Andrew Pollard, said that there is “[a small chance](#)” that the Oxford/AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine will be ready for use before Christmas.

If everything goes according to plan, Belgium can expect to launch the

first major vaccination campaigns “sometime in spring next year,” probably between March and June, according to virologist and intergovernmental Covid-19 spokesperson Steven Van Gucht.

Maïthé Chini
The Brussels Times

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STIB owed €42,000 in fines in 2019

Monday, 09 November 2020



Credit: Belga

Drivers of Brussels public transport company STIB are gathering an increasing number of fines, La Capitale reports.

Last year, 899 official reports were written up against STIB drivers, a significant increase compared to the 591 reports in 2018. An official report, known as a ‘procès-verbal’, is written up by a police officer when a traffic offence is committed.

Driving too fast and breaches of the pedestrian zone rules in Ixelles are mostly to blame, according to STIB.

The number of areas limited to 30 kilometres per hour, and the number of checks, has increased according to Brussels Mobility Minister Elke Van den Brandt.

Related News



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[Coronavirus has cost STIB over €118 million so far](#)

Most reports written up in pedestrian zones were for technical vehicles or intervention vehicles, [New Mobility](#) News reports.

STIB, or rather those who got reports, owed a total of €42,000, according to [Bruzz](#).

Jason Spinks
The Brussels Times

