

Study investigating the Health of Alcoa Employees Newsletter 2009



What is Healthwise?

Healthwise is one of the largest and most comprehensive occupational health studies ever carried out in Australia. It began in 1994 when Alcoa asked Monash University and the University of Western Australia to establish a long-term study looking at whether there are links between work and health amongst employees of Alcoa of Australia in Western Australia and Victoria. Healthwise is run by independent medical researchers from Monash University and the University of Western Australia.

Results and progress of the study are reported to an Advisory Board consisting of independent scientific advisors and representatives from Alcoa and the Unions. These findings are then communicated to Alcoa management and the workforce.

What are the benefits to you?

The benefit to you will be better knowledge in the future of how workplace conditions can affect health. The results can be used, where indicated, to target improvement projects and modify the way work is carried out. This means potentially a safer working environment. If you are currently part of the study, you have contributed to enhancing occupational health and safety at Alcoa and in the broader industry.

Why am I receiving this newsletter?

Since Healthwise began, it has communicated the findings to Alcoa employees mainly through face-to-face presentations on Alcoa sites. In order to keep you more regularly informed, you will now receive a Healthwise newsletter approximately every 18 months. This is the first edition. Should you have any further questions after reading this newsletter, please feel free to call the Healthwise study team via the phone number at the end of this newsletter.

What studies are being done?

The Healthwise studies currently consists of two studies, which have been running for many years:

1. The Healthwise New Starter Study of Respiratory Health

This study began recruiting new employees in 1996 and has monitored their respiratory health throughout their employment. New employees were invited to have an interview when they started work, at which we assessed their breathing and how well their lungs worked. We also collected workplace exposure information from Alcoa Occupational Hygienists. The people in this study then came back every year to have another test of their breathing capacity and answer some questions. Recruitment ended in WA in 1999 and in Victoria in 2004, because there were enough participants to ensure valid results.

- The findings for the Victorian part of the study were communicated to Victorian Operations employees in late 2006.
- The findings for the WA part of the study will be available later in 2009, when they will be communicated to Alcoa management and employees.



2. The Healthwise Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study

The Healthwise Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study (also known as the Health Surveillance Study) has been monitoring employees' health since 1983 to find out if there are any differences in their rates of cancer or causes of death compared to the general community. This allows the researchers to examine whether there are any increased risks associated with the type of work being undertaken.

NEW RECRUITMENT

- Employees were recruited into the Healthwise Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study in 1995/96 during the Healthwise Cross Sectional Study. Those who had already left Alcoa at the time, but had worked for more than 3 months since 1983 were automatically included. Also anyone who participated in the Healthwise New Starter Study was requested to join the Healthwise Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study.
- This year we will invite any new employees since 1995 who are not already included in the Healthwise Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study to join the study. We will determine who you are, so there is no need to find out if you are already included. Simply watch out for a Healthwise Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study invitation package in the mail, which you will receive if you have not already been included in the study.
- Taking part is voluntary and your decision will not affect your employment. The more people take part, the better the study will be.

LATEST VICTORIAN RESULTS

Since we communicated the main findings in 2004, we have carried out additional analyses, looking at cancer and death rates within the Victorian employees, and whether these could be related to certain workplace exposures accumulated during employment (coal tar pitch volatiles, benzo(a)pyrene, fluorides, oil mist, and inhalable dust) within the Victorian Operations. The results were:

1. There were no associations between any of the cumulative exposures and death from any cause.
2. There were no associations between cumulative coal tar pitch exposures and either lung cancer or bladder cancer.
3. There was no statistically significant increase in the rate of lung cancer for all employees compared to the general population, however the rate of lung cancer for employees with the highest cumulative inhalable dust exposure was greater than the rate for those with the lowest exposure. Over the 20 year study period 12 cases of lung cancer occurred in the highest exposed group whereas approximately 5 cases would have been expected based on the rate in the lowest exposed group. We do not know enough to explain this result at present but it may relate to the presence of asbestos in inhalable dust in some jobs in the 1960s and 1970s. Incomplete adjustment for smoking may partly account for the finding, as employees with higher cumulative inhalable dust exposures had higher rates of smoking. Inhalable dust exposures have declined in recent years and respiratory protection programs have also been strengthened.
4. There were no statistically significant associations between any other cumulative exposures and any of the cancers investigated.

NEXT PHASE

The next phase of the Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study will occur during 2009 and 2010 when once again we will update the data and undertake further analyses. This should enable us to shed further light on these preliminary findings.

We will continue to monitor rates of cancer and causes of death in the Healthwise Cancer Incidence and Mortality Study and we plan to keep recruiting new employees into the study. The next results from this study should be available in 2010.

THANKS TO ALL PARTICIPANTS INVOLVED IN THE HEALTHWISE STUDY FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT!

More information:

If you have any questions please feel free to contact the Healthwise Study Team at Monash University on freecall number **1800 062 534**

The Healthwise Research Team

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