



## 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.

### PRELIMINARY WESTERN AUSTRALIAN RESULTS

Since we communicated the main findings in 2004, we have carried out additional analyses, looking at cancer and death rates within the Western Australian employees, based on the amount of exposure to bauxite and alumina accumulated during employment. The results were:

1. The rates of cancers among mine and refinery workers were not elevated in relation to exposure to bauxite or alumina.
2. A preliminary finding, based on very few cases, suggests a possible link between increasing cumulative bauxite exposure and death from lung diseases other than cancer. The numbers are too small at this stage to draw any conclusion. If this is a real association, it should become clearer in the next phase of the study. We also found that over the 20 year study period, fewer WA Alcoa employees died of lung disease than expected on the basis of general population rates (7 observed versus 20 expected).
3. A preliminary finding, based on very few cases, suggests a possible link between increasing cumulative alumina exposure and death from stroke. The numbers are too small at this stage to draw any conclusion. If this is a real association, it should become clearer in the next phase of the study. We also found that over the 20 year study period, fewer WA Alcoa employees died of stroke than expected on the basis of general population rates (10 observed versus 16 expected).

### 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 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

- Professor Malcolm Sim, *Monash University, Melbourne*
- Professor Nick de Klerk, *University of Western Australia, Perth*
- Professor Bill Musk, *University of Western Australia, Perth*
- Associate Professor Lin Fritschi, *Western Australian Institute for Medical Research, Perth*