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# Alaska is far from US stockpiles of radiation antidote

**STOCKPILE: Potassium iodide should ideally be started before exposure.**

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JUNEAU -- If Alaska had a radiation emergency, it would rely on the national stockpile of medical material to treat its residents, and the nearest supply is somewhere in the Lower 48, state officials said Tuesday.

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That could be a problem in the event of an unanticipated or quickly developing crisis. Potassium iodide, one of the key medications to prevent long-term thyroid disease caused by radioactive iodine, should ideally be taken two hours before exposure through four hours after, and longer if the threat continues, said Dr. Joe McLaughlin, the state epidemiologist.

But the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, which manages the stockpile, would take up to 12 hours just to get supplies to Alaska, said Chris Laborde, state manager of public health preparedness.

That's probably not a problem with the current nuclear crisis in Japan. State and federal officials say it's extremely unlikely that the Fukushima reactors would release a large enough volume of radioactive material to affect Alaska. Even if an explosive release occurred, it would take air currents two days to carry the material to the Aleutians and another day to reach Southcentral Alaska, allowing time to bring in supplies from Lower 48 depots, officials said.

But there are other potential sources of nuclear fission material upwind from Alaska in Russia, China and the Koreas, and nuclear-powered vessels, from Russian icebreakers to U.S. submarines, routinely sail in northern waters. While experts say that North Korea currently lacks the ability to send a missile to Alaska, it has demonstrated some capability at making nuclear weapons.

The situation involving the CDC stockpile emerged from hearings in Juneau Tuesday at the Senate State Affairs Committee. Chairman Bill Wielechowski, D-Anchorage, called the session to examine

how radiation is being monitored in Alaska and how state and federal officials would respond to a radiation emergency. The House Health and Social Services Committee also looked at the issue.

As they have been doing since the start of the crisis in Japan, officials continued to say the disabled nuclear reactors and their spent fuel stockpiles pose no health risks in Alaska. Three monitoring sites, part of the EPA's national radiation monitoring network, have detected no increase in radiation in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau.

Testifying to the Senate by telephone, Jonathan Edwards, director of the EPA's radiation protection division in Washington, D.C., said three portable monitors were sent to Alaska "in an abundance of caution." The three were sent to Nome, Dutch Harbor and Juneau after a logistical problem prevented stationing one in Sitka, Edwards said.

"We didn't expect to see any major upticks or anything but wanted to make sure we had very good coverage for Alaska, given the fact that you are closer than the continental United States to Japan," Edwards said.

Later in the day, the state health lab director, Bernd Jilly, said the Nome device was damaged during shipment and will be replaced. The other two portables were taking readings and being calibrated, Jilly said.

But if something did happen, Alaska would be far from help.

Laborde said the CDC won't say where its stockpiles are located for security reasons. Under federal policy, the medications wouldn't be moved to Alaska until there was a "credible threat."

Should that happen, the CDC would mount what in effect would be a 10-hour version of the Nome serum run. The CDC would send the material to Anchorage, where state officials would unpack it and redistribute it to health centers around the state, Laborde said. If commercial transportation was unavailable, the state would use the National Guard and U.S. Coast Guard, she said.

U.S. Sen. Mark Begich, in Juneau for his annual address to the Alaska Legislature, said he expected congressional hearings on lessons learned from the multiple disasters in Japan: earthquake, tsunami and nuclear. McLaughlin, the state epidemiologist, said health officials need to weigh the relative risks in deciding whether Alaska should have a stash of potassium iodide and other preventive medications, like Prussian blue and DTPA, an acid that bonds with metal. Fourteen tablets of potassium iodide, which might be required if a threat lasted two weeks, costs about \$10, he said. The drug has a shelf life of about seven years.

"We have to allocate our resources according to the high-risk events," said Kerre Fischer, deputy director of the Alaska Division of Public Health. "The risk of a radiation event in Alaska is just way too low."

That's not the case with states having nuclear power plants, which are required to cache potassium iodide in the vicinity of reactors, McLaughlin said.

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The human thyroid can be a sponge for iodine. Iodine-131, a radioactive byproduct of uranium fission with a half-life of eight days, is absorbed by the thyroid, potentially damaging the gland or setting the stage for future cancers.

Potassium iodide saturates the thyroid, reducing the likelihood it would absorb radioactive iodine. Potassium iodide has been sold through websites but health experts say it would be a mistake to take it now.

Other radioactive products of fission are dangerous because they have chemical properties similar to common substances. Cesium-137 behaves like sodium in table salt, while the body will treat strontium-90 as if it were calcium. Both isotopes have half-lives of about 30 years.

The EPA said Tuesday that three radiation monitors in California and one in Washington state had detected elevated levels of isotopes, though they remained "millions of times below levels of concern." The material was analyzed from filters on the monitors that were sent to an EPA lab Friday and showed cesium-137, tellurium-132 and iodine-131 and -132.

The agency also reported that on Monday night, a monitor in Hawaii "detected minuscule levels of an isotope that is also consistent with the Japanese nuclear incident" but the results were still preliminary.

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**nerevar0405**

Will the government tell us Western Alaskans if any radiation is detected here? Nope! We are just villagers and we are not that important.

03/27/2011 05:11 PM 1 Like

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**anganaran**

Not surprised...Alaska IS far from a lot of other things/places in the U.S.. Rural Alaska is even farther than the rest of Alaska and that much more removed from the U.S....so far that some modern amenities have not reached it yet.

03/23/2011 01:57 PM

Like Reply



**justice\_lady**

If some thing were to happen to Alaska. the government of Alaska should be prepared to protect it's people. Including the villages of Alaska. If the government fails to protect it's people, should we trust the government for feeling safe and being secure? Is Dan Sullivan doing some thing about this?

03/23/2011 12:30 PM 1 Like

Like Reply



**King\_Crab**

I've had potassium iodide tablets for about a year, ordered them from a vitamin store on line. My main concern with the disaster taking place in Japan is reactor #3. It uses a fuel called MOX which is a mixture of plutonium and uranium. There is also untold numbers of spent fuel rods of this makeup in at least one of the pools which they are having trouble keeping water in. This last paragraph of this story is cause for concern.

"The agency also reported that on Monday night, a monitor in Hawaii "detected minuscule levels of an isotope that is also consistent with the Japanese nuclear incident" but the results were still preliminary."

I don't trust the Japanese government anymore than I trust our government. The last thing our government wants is all out panic.

Google MOX fuel.

03/23/2011 09:03 AM 5 Likes

Like Reply



**Nightterror218**

that is good to not trust them, but the things is that the radiation for "leaks" is nothing compared to the radiation form nuclear bomb testing in the Pacific. IF a meltdown were to occur and causes an explosion up in the jet stream then there should be some concern. A meltdown similar to Chernobyl would have to occur. Otherwise the radiation is spread out over such a huge area that is in negotiable. If a meltdown occurs it could be localized (literally melts down and releases radiation out and into water and ect. instead of into the air. People have a tendency to panic over things out of their control all the time and this is another one. There have been news reports of people getting sick from the potassium iodide tablets because they are taking them and not needing them and taking too many. Hawaii will get hit so much harder then Alaska and the west coast that is would be start to watch them for any radiation change.

03/23/2011 09:57 AM in reply to King\_Crab

Like Reply

**Nightterror218**

Why do we have to worry about it when the only radiation that we would get in Chernobyl like meltdown. Lower 48 has more problems because they are nuclear plants scattered around down there. And antidote does not exist for radiation...just treatments and prevention.

03/23/2011 08:22 AM 3 Likes

Like Reply

**sunnyak**

2012 is coming...

03/23/2011 07:34 AM 1 Like

Like Reply

**justice\_lady**

the Mayan's probably got tired of making a calender thousands of years ahead of them.2012 doesnt mean any thing. if the world is supposed to end,it would have ended 2000.or 2001,how times was the world supposed to end? exactly. every one should calm down about [2012.im](#) getting sick and tired of hearing "2012 is when the world will end" when 2013 comes by. i will scream,and laugh my lungs out.people are crazy.come on people lets be realistic.

03/23/2011 12:36 PM in reply to sunnyak 2 Likes

Like Reply

**rlee777**

KI pills can be purchased now, but you can not buy standard antibiotics for a emergency kit without a doctor's prescription. Many of these have a shelf life of three to five years, and could easily be stored in a first aid kit. If we have another 64 type quake and access to doctors and hospitals is limited or not possible, a normal inconvenience can became a life threatening event.

Because of Alaska's isolation, we have unique supply problems not faced in the lower 48 states, I think in this case federal drug regulations maybe placing Alaskans at risk.

The Strategic National Reserve makes a big assumption, primarily that air traffic is always possible. If loose ability to maintain air traffic, you can't truck in supplies across state lines like down south.

03/23/2011 07:07 AM 6 Likes

Like Reply

**nDjinn**

I expected a little less ignorance from a reporter.

03/23/2011 04:42 AM 4 Likes

Like Reply

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