

Health | 26.11.2010

## Higher rates of cancer found in area near dilapidated nuclear waste dump



The Lower Saxony government has said those living near a dilapidated nuclear waste storage facility have higher rates of cancer. Men have twice the rate of leukemia and women have three times the rate of thyroid cancer.

*The Asse storage facility is due to be emptied out and shut down*

Newly published figures from the Lower Saxony state cancer registry show that in the area around Asse, the site of a controversial nuclear waste dump near Wolfenbuettel, some cancer rates are higher than normal.

Between 2002 and 2009 there were 12 cases of leukemia in the greater Asse region. The area had twice the rate expected for men. While there was no significant increase in leukemia for women, their rate of thyroid cancer was three times as high as normal.

The government has not yet determined if the increase is related to the proximity to the nuclear waste site. A working group of representatives from Lower Saxony's environment, social, and health ministries as well as the federal agency for radiation protection is set to meet over the next few weeks to take a closer look at the data.

Joerg Roehmann, the district administrator in Wolfenbuettel, said in an interview with German public television that the numbers needed to be analyzed and put into context before any conclusions can be made.

"I'd like to appeal to anyone from this area who has been diagnosed with leukemia, for example, to come forward, along with doctors or anyone treating these patients to help us make comparisons and create a context for this data," he said.

"We don't know anything about exact location, age, occupation, or family history in these cases."

### No blame yet

Asse was originally a salt mine. Between 1967 and 1978 around 126,000 drums of waste were stored in the facility. More recently it's been declared unstable because of a danger of collapse and water leaks and is due to be emptied out and shut down.



The nuclear waste is stored in a former salt mine

Ursula Kleber is on the board of directors of a non-profit organization called aufpASSEn, a play on words with Asse and the German word 'aufpassen,' meaning 'to take care of.'

AufpASSEn addresses problems and concerns relating to the site.

"Because of Asse, we're pretty nervous around here," Kleber told Deutsche Welle "So it's good that this investigation is taking place. But we don't have enough information yet to say this was caused by Asse."

## Statistical variance

While the exact cause of the higher leukemia and thyroid cancer rates are being examined, it is important to note that the actual number of cases reported is relatively small.

In the seven years covered in the newly released statistics, 12 cases of leukemia in men were reported from the greater Asse area. The average is five.



Radiation levels are carefully monitored at Asse

Dr. Stefanie Seltmann from the German Cancer Research Center in Heidelberg told Deutsche Welle that these numbers are not necessarily cause for alarm.

"If you assume that there are about 10,000 small communities like this in Germany," she said, "then strictly from a standpoint of statistical variation, if five cases is average, some communities will have 12 while others won't have any, without any particular reason such as radiation."

It is slightly more concerning that in every year surveyed this statistical variation existed, but Dr. Seltmann says it could all turn out to be just a coincidence.

With such a small sample group, definitive answers will have to wait a few more weeks for the conclusion of the working group in Lower Saxony.

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