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Tests find tungsten in Fallon water supply

Frank X. Mullen Jr. RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL 9/17/2002 11:32 pm

New tests show Fallon's water supply contains tungsten, a metal also found in 80 percent of residents examined as part of the investigation into the town's leukemia cluster of 16 children, officials said Tuesday.

Scientists hired by Fallon said the levels in municipal wells were expected and were comparatively low, between 32 and 24 parts per billion. Eighty percent of the people in the leukemia study had between 0 and 53 parts per billion of tungsten in their urine. But very few people had high levels, the CDC said. Half of those tested had less than one part per billion of tungsten in their urine, while the other half had more than one part.

Investigators with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said there's no known link between the mineral and leukemia. They said little research has been done on the effects of tungsten outside the workplace, but it is known to be toxic when linked with other elements, such as cobalt, in very high exposures.

"So as far as we can tell there's no reason for alarm," said Fallon Mayor Ken Tedford. "We knew that tungsten is naturally occurring in the environment here, but there is no Clean Water Act standard for it and, as far as anyone knows, no health risks associated with such low levels."

Fallon officials said there may not be a need to filter the metal from the water supply.

"Our conclusion so far is that there is no evidence of health risks at these levels," said Robert Meyer, a senior researcher for Shepherd Miller, the town's consultant.

"There is no minimum standard for tungsten in water, so even if you started removing it, how would you know when you were done?"

Churchill County had 17 tungsten mines, but all have been closed for 30 years or more. The metal has also been found in tree rings in Fallon and Sierra Vista, Ariz., which has seven cases of childhood leukemia. Like Fallon, the number of childhood leukemia cases in Sierra Vista has exceeded what is expected for the population in those communities.

Mark Witten, a researcher at the University of Arizona in Tucson, is studying the effects of tungsten on leukemia cells. He said the metal probably doesn't cause leukemia, but may somehow play a role in the cluster when combined with some other substance.

Experts have said tungsten is so common in the West, especially in northern Nevada, that it might be found in most well water and in the urine of people who drink that water. But tungsten isn't among the metals looked for in standard water tests.

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"It may be quite common all through this area," said Janet A. Johnson, also a senior researcher for Shepherd Miller.

Federal scientists who spotted high amounts of tungsten in Fallon-area residents said they want to look for any ill health effects from the naturally-occurring metal elsewhere in the country.

Dr. Carol Rubin, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said long-term research could take years, but an examination of people living in areas similar to Fallon could be done more quickly.

Once an appropriate community is identified, scientists would collect samples and conduct tests using the same procedures employed in Fallon, Rubin said.

Johnson and Meyer said they've asked the CDC for more detailed information about tungsten levels in the people tested to see if the water supply can account for the exposures detected. They said they are also interested in how the CDC set 32 parts per billion as the national standard for tungsten and whether any mining areas like Nevada were part of the national study.

"It's been difficult to get a reasonable level of detail about this, so it makes it hard to interpret the data," Meyer said. "It's hard to say anything with certainty, but it's reasonable to conclude that the water was the source for some of the tungsten levels detected in the residents."

Tedford said Fallon is satisfied there are no health risks associated with the tungsten in the water.

"State and federal investigators felt that the presence of tungsten was important enough to warrant a special report to the community, so we felt it was important to take a look at it," he said. "We wanted to provide answers as quickly as possible. It will be interesting to see if the metal is also in the other water systems in northern Nevada."

Fallon also is building a treatment plant to remove arsenic from its water supply. Area water is high in the substance, and test results released by the CDC also found high levels in the population.

Arsenic is linked to skin, stomach and bladder cancer but it has not been linked to leukemia.



Top

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