

BP cleanup workers report serious health problems

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Workers hired by BP to assist with cleanup efforts in the Gulf of Mexico have begun reporting health problems. Many have complained of symptoms including chest pains, severe headaches, breathing problems, dizziness and nosebleeds. Cleanup crews spend long hours each day on water contaminated by oil and doused with Corexit, the toxic oil dispersant used by BP to break up oil in the water.

The Louisiana Department of Health reports receiving dozens of complaints relating to the oil spill in the past week while the West Jefferson Medical Center in Marrero, Louisiana has reported several cases in which BP workers have come in complaining of flu-like symptoms. On Wednesday, no less than 125 boats working in the Breton Sound area of Louisiana were recalled to shore by the Coast Guard after workers complained of feeling ill.

While the symptoms reported by workers are consistent with the inhalation of oil vapors, hospitals are thus far only stating that symptoms were caused by the inhalation of “irritants,” and have not confirmed the exact source or sources.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported the story of George Jackson, a 53-year-old fisherman from Louisiana unemployed since the spill. Hired by BP to assist in the deployment of containment booms in the Gulf, Jackson complained of burning eyes, headaches and nausea after spending hours working on the water. “They [BP officials] told us if we ran into oil, it wasn’t supposed to bother us,” Jackson told the *Times*, adding, “As far as gloves, no, we haven’t been wearing any gloves.”

Crude oil contains a number of components that are toxic and may cause significant health problems, including toluene, polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons and benzene. Exposure to benzene can cause headaches, nausea, and central nervous system

depression. Severe exposure can cause convulsions and can even be fatal, while long-term exposure can cause degeneration of bone marrow.

Among those treated at the West Jefferson Medical Center was John Wunstell Jr., a commercial shrimp fisherman who had assisted in cleanup work. Wunstell was airlifted to West Jefferson and hospitalized last weekend after complaining of intense headaches and nosebleeds. He is now a member of a class-action lawsuit against BP.

In an affidavit, Wunstell described feeling as though he’d been hit by a “train wreck” while out on the water. Upon arriving at West Jefferson, said Wunstell, “I was stripped of my clothing, washed with water and several showers, before I was allowed into the hospital. When I asked for my clothing, I was told that BP had confiscated all of my clothing and it would not be returned.”

Wunstell alleges that planes spraying oil dispersant over the gulf released the chemical over the area where he was working. Wunstell is one of many who have expressed worry that exposure to chemicals in Corexit is making them sick. The Center for Disease Control has reported that long-term or repeated exposure to oil dispersants may cause significant health risks including damage to the central nervous system, blood, kidneys and liver.

BP has ignored instructions from the Environmental Protection Agency to use a less toxic dispersant, and the EPA has subsequently failed to pursue the request.

While concerns over worker safety continue to mount, BP CEO Tony Hayward has refused to accept any responsibility for the symptoms reported by his workers. Attempting to downplay the reports of illnesses among his cleanup crew, Hayward absurdly claimed it was likely a case of food poisoning.

The complaints registered by BP workers recall those of cleanup workers from the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster as well as other oil spills, including the MV Braer spill from 1993 and the Prestige spill from 2002. Illnesses affecting oil spill workers are well documented, but there are growing signs that the lessons of previous spills have gone ignored. Clint Guidry, president of the Louisiana Shrimpers Association, has alleged that BP has threatened to fire workers who show up wearing protective masks.

The health problems faced by BP cleanup workers is in part a result of the same process of deregulation that led up to the initial explosion and oil eruption, as well as the recent mining disaster in West Virginia and the industrial plant explosions that have become all too common in the US.

Those agencies given the task of regulating workplace safety have been stripped of their powers and generally function as agents of the companies they are supposed to regulate. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, an agency of the US Department of Labor, has been working closely with BP and has insisted BP cleanup workers do not require respirators.



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