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Worry About Dispersant Rises as Men in Work Crew Complain of Health Problems

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NEW ORLEANS — Concerns about the chemical dispersant being used to fight the gulf oil spill are suddenly spiking along the coast here, with workers fretting over exposure and health officials investigating a tiny cluster of complaints.

On Wednesday afternoon, seven crew members aboard fishing vessels who had been working to clean up Breton Sound, southeast of New Orleans, blamed the chemicals for health complaints including nausea, shortness of breath and high blood pressure.

All were working on a cleanup crew one hour south of Venice, La., by boat and were admitted to a hospital. Doctors who examined them said that their conditions were “related to some kind of irritant, combined with dehydration” and predicted that they would be discharged within a day or two.

Coast Guard officials said that the boats had been 50 miles northwest of any spraying of the chemicals and that the men had been wearing protective gear. They also noted that conditions were exceptionally hot and humid. Still, they called 125 boats in the area back to shore as they investigated before sending them out again on Thursday.

A spokeswoman for the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals said that no other hospital or poison control center in the region had reported ailments linked in any way to the dispersant.

Yet anxiety about the dispersant was alive and growing across many forums. Last week the Environmental Protection Agency asked BP to stop using the dispersant, known as Corexit, and find a safer alternative. BP disputed the agency's assessment of its level of toxicity, and the environmental agency asked the oil giant to at the very least reduce the amount it was using.

An E.P.A. official said Thursday that BP was now using less than 15,000 gallons of Corexit dispersant a day, down from 70,000 a day over the weekend.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the government agency charged with monitoring the well-being of marine mammals, said that it had been fielding rumors for days of mass dolphin deaths relating to dispersants, but that it had seen no physical evidence of them.

At a Congressional hearing, Representative Jerrold Nadler, a New York Democrat, said that the use of dispersants "could result in thousands and thousands of people getting sick or dying as a result of the cleanup, not of the original disaster."

Dispersants are used to break up oil spills to limit their effects on sea and shore life. They are themselves toxins, although they are rapidly diluted in the sea.

Still, there is little knowledge about their long-term effects on ecosystems, and they have never been applied in the quantity used in the Gulf of Mexico. More than 700,000 gallons of Corexit dispersants have now been sprayed on the gulf's surface and injected onto the leaking wellhead below.

Suspensions have been fanned by the refusal of Nalco, the company that makes the dispersant, to disclose the chemical formula for Corexit, which it calls proprietary. Seeking to counter the criticism, the company released a statement on Thursday ticking off everyday consumer products "with specific ingredients in common with Corexit 9500."

News of the sick workers brought consternation on Thursday at a BP safety training seminar in Chalmette, La., for fishermen planning to take part in the cleanup.

"Why are they using dispersants that are illegal in other countries?" asked one of the fishermen, who declined to be named, saying that BP had

instructed the men not to speak to the news media. (Corexit is banned in Britain but approved for use in the United States and Canada.)

Several said BP officials had sought to reassure them about the safety of the dispersants during the morning session. "They say we don't need respirators," said another one, shaking his head. "I don't know."

At the West Jefferson Medical Center in Marrero, La., where the seven workers were hospitalized, doctors could not say for sure what caused the problem.

The first three workers were from a single boat, and one was sick enough that emergency services were summoned to airlift him off the vessel. The other two piloted the boat north to Venice, where an ambulance took them to the hospital. The other four in the same work crew were admitted later in the day.

They said they believed that they had been exposed to dispersant spray, according to Dr. Robert Chugden, an emergency room physician at the hospital.

They were complaining of a "bad, weak feeling," he said. Their more specific complaints included nausea, dizziness, headaches, coughs and skin irritation.

Dr. Chugden said the men had been given intravenous fluid as well as medicine for nausea and headaches.

Taslin Alfonzo, a hospital spokesman, said that many workers had been out at sea in small boats day after day for 20 to 30 days and might not have had enough to drink.

Epidemiologists at the Louisiana department of health are investigating the cases at West Jefferson Medical Center, the department spokeswoman said.

Leslie Kaufman reported from New Orleans, and Elisabeth Rosenthal from New York. Amy Harmon contributed reporting from New Orleans, and Campbell Robertson from Venice, La.