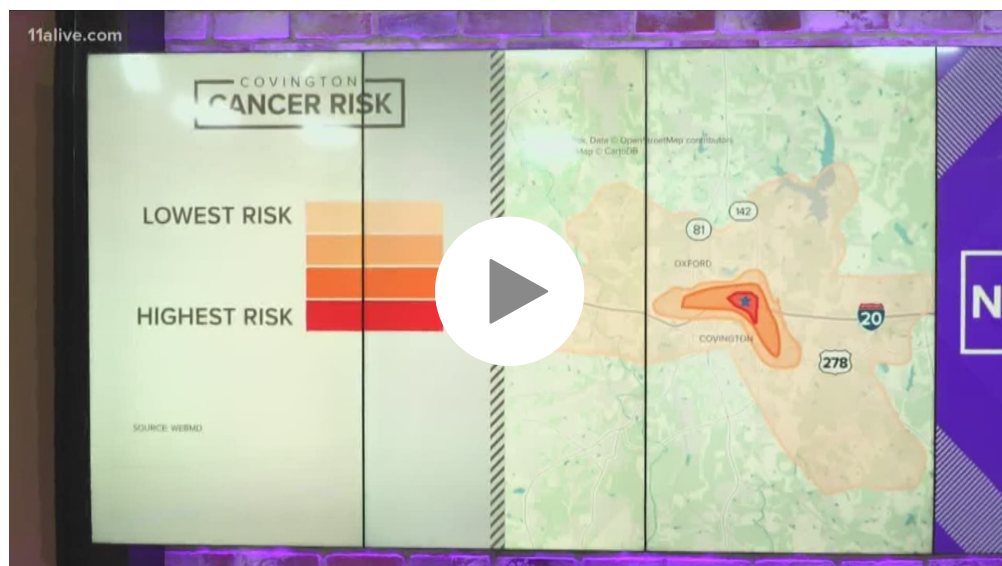


LOCAL

Maps show zones with 100+ extra cases of cancer surrounding chemical plants

'This stuff doesn't belong anywhere near people,' said a man who lives near a Sterigenics plant in Illinois.



Author: Ryan Kruger, Michael King
Published: 7:08 PM EDT July 23, 2019
Updated: 5:01 PM EDT July 24, 2019

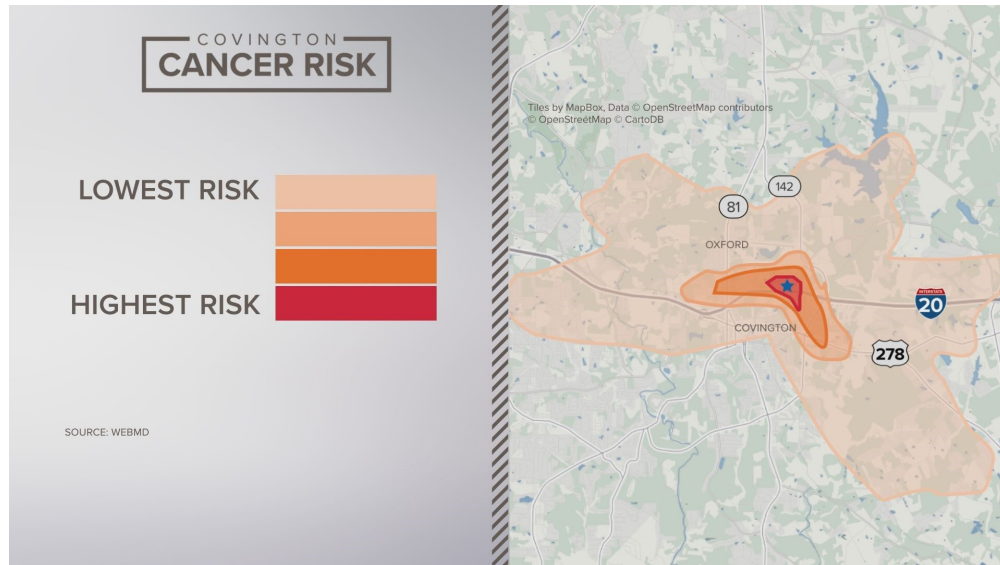


SMYRNA, Ga. — Residents in communities have started to fight back after reports surfaced about dangerous toxins being released into the air near their homes.

According to a [recent report by WebMD](#), the chemical compound ethylene oxide is used on about half of the medical products in the United States that require sterilization. It is also used in the manufacture of other chemicals like antifreeze.

The WebMD report, published over the weekend, warned that the level of ethylene oxide that is released into the surrounding air near 109 Census tracts around the nation are at a higher risk for cancer due to airborne toxins.

Three of the Census tracts cited with the highest readings are in Smyrna and Covington, and are reported to be driven by ethylene oxide. One of the two firms in question is Sterigenics in Smyrna.

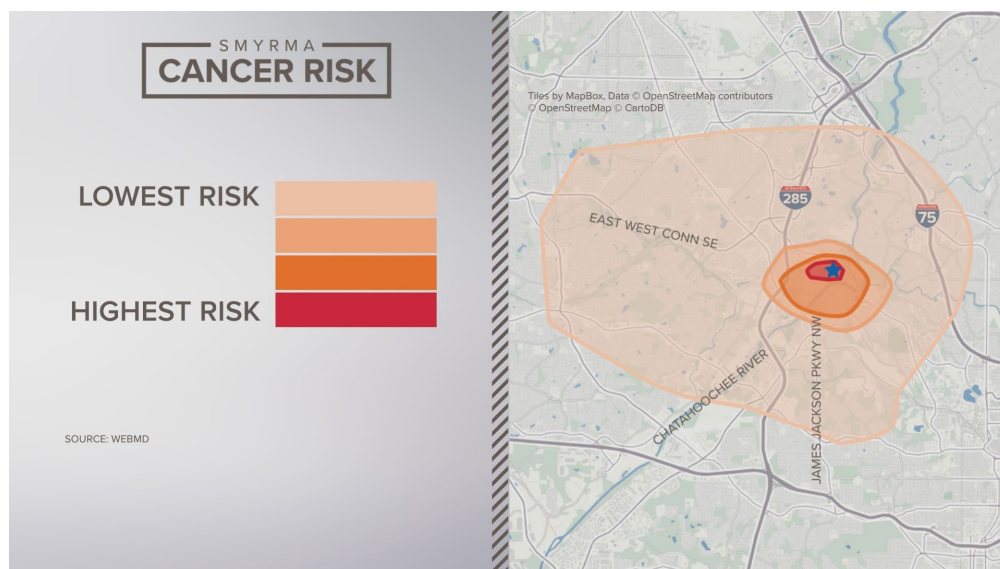


Credit: WXIA

According to the WebMD report, the United States [Environmental Protection Agency](#) has updated its classification for ethylene oxide from "Likely to cause cancer" to "Definitely causes cancer."

RELATED: [Cancer-causing chemical in 2 Georgia communities leads to more cases of cancer, experts say](#)

The EPA considers it unacceptable if you have 100 extra cases of cancer per 1 million people exposed. In the Smyrna area, it was 114 extra cases of cancer, which is unexceptionable to the EPA.



Credit: WXIA

"This stuff doesn't belong near people," said Steve Leopoldo. He is a founding member of [Stop Sterigenics](#) and lives less than a mile and a half from a [Sterigenics](#) plant in Willowbrook, Illinois, about 20 miles southwest of downtown Chicago.

"There's no safe level of ethylene oxide," Leopoldo told 11Alive's Ryan Kruger. "They're still proposing to put 85 pounds of this stuff up in the air."

The first word about the toxin spreading happened in August of last year. In February, the plant was shut down by the Illinois EPA.

"It's been entirely exhausting and extremely disappointing. We've been hoping that layer upon layer of government would do something. But everyone just points the finger toward each other," Leopoldo said.

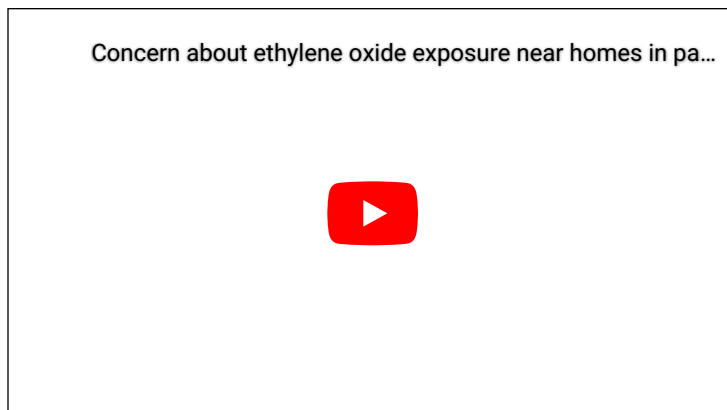
According to a [report from NBC station WMAQ](#), Sterigenics reached an agreement with Illinois state officials earlier this month allowing the Willowbrook plant to reopen.

11Alive spoke with officials in Cobb County regarding the ethylene oxide emissions from the Smyrna plant, which, [according to the 2018 EPA report](#), exceeds amounts acceptable to the EPA.

The EPA says the 2018 report is based on 2014 data, which they said was the most recent data they have available.

According to an [EPA statement released to 11Alive on Tuesday](#), the Smyrna Sterigenics facility has since added emissions controls, which have reduced ethylene oxide emissions by over 90 percent, based on 2017 estimates. The EPA said Sterigenics is working to install additional controls.

RELATED: [EPA: Emissions of cancer-causing chemical in neighborhoods do not exceed maximum lifetime risk amounts](#)



[Georgia state Sen. Jen Jordan](#) wants Sterigenics to do more.

"Two of the affected areas with an elevated cancer risk are in the Smyrna area and in the heart of my Senate district. The elevated risk levels are believed to be caused by the operation of a Sterigenics plant that uses ethylene oxide to sterilize medical devices and products. The use of this chemical results in dangerous emissions into the air," Jordan said in a statement.

RELATED: [What is ethylene oxide?](#)

Jordan pointed out that Sterigenics was able to significantly reduce emissions in Illinois and wants to see the same thing happen in Georgia.

"After tremendous public outrage, state action by the [Illinois EPD](#) (Environmental Protection Division), and a lawsuit filed by the Illinois Attorney General, Sterigenics installed new equipment that is intended to dramatically reduce emissions of ethylene oxide. Sterigenics knows how to take steps to remediate the problem, and I hope that they will work with us to do the same here," she said.

11Alive reached out to Sterigenics for a statement, which assured their Atlanta facility operates safely in compliance with all permits and Georgia environmental regulations.

"Sterigenics is committed to the safety of the communities in which we operate, our employees and the patients we serve. We follow rigorous safety protocols at our Atlanta facility and at all of our facilities and are committed to continuously improving our operations in the ongoing interest of public safety," the company said.

[Read the full statement.](#)

The Sterigenics Atlanta facility safely operates in compliance with permits and regulations established by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) and the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). As part of our commitment to ongoing improvements, we have consistently taken voluntary steps to reduce emissions of ethylene oxide (EO) from the facility resulting in 90% reduction in EO emissions over the past five years. In addition, we are working with the Georgia EPD regarding additional voluntary enhancements that are consistent with changes being undertaken at other Sterigenics facilities and which will further reduce EO emissions from the facility to negligible levels. We anticipate completing the enhancements over 13 to 14 weeks following receipt of the necessary permits.

EO is a vital resource in the fabrication of medical products and devices. Our Atlanta facility sterilizes many products including surgical tools, oncological syringes, catheters, hospital gowns and decontamination sets which are essential in today's hospitals. The same properties that make EO such an important resource for sterilization also require that it is controlled carefully. We take our responsibility for the safe handling and control of EO very seriously which is precisely why we are working with the Georgia EPD to implement additional voluntary improvements.

Sterigenics is committed to the safety of the communities in which we operate, our employees and the patients we serve. We follow rigorous safety protocols at our Atlanta facility and at all of our facilities and are committed to continuously improving our operations in the ongoing interest of public safety.

Sterigenics Comments on Atlanta Facility Operations 072319.pdf

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Cobb County Commissioner Bob Ott said his office has spoken to the [Georgia Environmental Protection Division](#) about ensuring that residents close to the Sterigenics plant are getting the answers they need about the ethylene oxide emissions.

"Even though the state has authority in monitoring emissions coming from the plant, I think it is important the county makes sure residents in the area get their questions answered and are briefed on any new results as soon as possible," Ott said in an emailed statement to 11Alive on Tuesday.

What is ethylene oxide?



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