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## Arsenic pollution found in south Minneapolis neighborhood

by [Dan Olson](#), Minnesota Public Radio  
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*Several Phillips neighborhood homes on this south Minneapolis street have dangerously high levels of arsenic in yard soil. (MPR Photo/Dan Olson)*

**Federal tests confirm high levels of arsenic at 10 south Minneapolis locations, including a number of homes. The sites are in the Phillips neighborhood downwind from a former pesticide plant, where arsenic was used 60 years ago. Federal officials say they want to begin cleanup of the arsenic pollution this summer. A neighborhood activist says yards at dozens more homes could have high levels of arsenic.**

Minneapolis, Minn. — The Environmental Protection Agency's Chicago office says soil samples from hundreds of sites in the east end of the Phillips neighborhood, near Hiawatha Ave., show mostly low levels. But regional EPA supervisor Ken Rhame says 10 have high levels that pose a danger to human health.

"(There are) levels ranging from background, which is less than 10 parts per million (ppm), all the way up to -- I think their highest number was 635 parts per million," Rhame says.

Ten parts per million is the arsenic level allowed by state law. Health officials say levels up to 30 ppm pose no danger. Arsenic is a poison that can cause neurological and cardiovascular problems, and upset the human gastrointestinal system.



[Children are at highest risk](#)

Minnesota Department of Health toxicologist Rita Messing says 100 ppm is the level at which arsenic causes immediate health problems. She says the likely victims are children playing in their yards.

"Almost all the danger from the contaminated soil occurs from ingestion. And most of that ingestion is going to be from hand-to-mouth behavior that children have," Messing says.

Neighborhood residents have known about the arsenic pollution for more than a year.

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The new federal tests confirm state test results. In letters and at neighborhood meetings, officials have told the several hundred families in the east Phillips neighborhood to wash frequently, avoid wearing their shoes in the house, wash and peel garden vegetables and wear masks when raking the lawn.

Phillips is Minneapolis' largest and poorest neighborhood. The median income is \$17,000 for a family of four. Many residents are immigrants from Somalia and Mexico.

Rich Hunt lives near one of the arsenic hot spots. He's lived in the neighborhood since 1982, and gave state officials permission to test the soil in his yard.

"They came back within normal limits," Hunt says. "So I'm not worried about it one way or another ... I'm 67 and disgustingly healthy."



However MDA toxicologist Rita Messing says long-term exposure to even relatively low levels of arsenic can cause problems.

"There the issue is an increased risk for some cancers and some neurological problems, and possibly cardiovascular problems. But those would be because of small exposures over many years," says Messing.

[Neighbors know of danger](#)

The EPA's Ken Rhame says he wants cleanup to begin this summer. At homes where arsenic levels are high, as much as a foot of soil will be excavated and clean fill

hailed in.

The federal tests showed some high levels beyond the area first tested. However Rhame thinks there is no arsenic pollution in neighborhoods in other directions.



The plant site at 28th St. and Hiawatha Ave. is covered year round now. Previous owners capped it with clean fill and a layer of asphalt. Cleanup of the parcel could cost more than \$3 million. It could cost another \$2 million to clean up neighborhood arsenic hot spots.

[Arsenic plant site is capped](#)

The current owner of the former pesticide plant site is CMC Heartland Partners, a Chicago-based real estate investment company. CEO Lawrence Adelman says his company has an agreement for the remediation of the old pesticide plant site, and is willing to talk about neighborhood cleanup.

Residents want to avoid a protracted legal battle so cleanup can begin. Rebekah Cross, the executive director of the East Phillips Improvement Coalition, assumes the health of some residents has already been harmed by the arsenic pollution. She says it's likely that many more than 10 homes have dangerous levels of arsenic.

"We could be talking anywhere from 50 to 75 yards that could have arsenic levels that will need to be cleaned up, and that's considered a fairly moderate cleanup," Cross says.

The CMC Heartland Lite Yard site in south Minneapolis is one of more than 80 on the state's Superfund list. It narrowly avoided federal Superfund status, and instead has been ranked as a priority site -- which means it deserves attention sooner rather than later.

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