

Families in Ohio cancer cluster suing Whirlpool

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TOLEDO, Ohio (AP) -- Families whose children have been among dozens sickened in an Ohio cancer cluster for more than a decade are hopeful that they've come up with a cause.

Environmental testing paid for by the families found a suspected cancer-causing chemical compound in the attics of five homes within an area of northern Ohio that state health authorities have declared a cancer cluster, according to a lawsuit.

The families believe the compound called benzaldehyde came from a Whirlpool Corp. washing machine plant in Clyde, a city just south of Lake Erie where many of the first cancer cases were diagnosed.

Nearly 40 young people in the area have been diagnosed with various types of cancer since the mid-1990s. Three have died.

Attorneys who filed the federal lawsuit for the families said Wednesday that Whirlpool's factory uses benzaldehyde as a solvent in painting and porcelain coating.

There has been some research into the compound and its effects on animals, but it has not been studied well for human health effects, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit also says Whirlpool dumped other chemicals at a park it once owned near the city. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said last year that soil samples from the park showed high levels of a chemical believed to increase the risk of certain cancers, but it did not link the contaminants with the cancer cluster.

A statement released Wednesday by Whirlpool, based in Benton Harbor, Mich., said the company would vigorously defend the company, its employees and the community against the allegations.

"Whirlpool has been part of the fabric of the Clyde community for more than 60 years and we remain committed to acting responsibly," the statement said.

The appliance maker has previously said it wants to help find out what was causing the illnesses, and it paid for recent soil and water testing at the park it built in the 1950s.

Ohio health and environmental regulators have conducted hundreds of air and water samples during the past five years without finding any answers.

Some investigators speculated the cause was environmental and may have come and gone -- maybe a chemical from a factory or a dump that polluted the air or water.

The diagnoses peaked in 2006, when nine children were told they had cancer.

Families frustrated by the lack of answers hired a private company earlier this year to test a water treatment plant, sludge from a water reservoir and dust in the five attics.

"The air is the one common thing that all of these children who've gotten sick and died have in common," said attorney Alan Mortensen. "They all played in the same air."

He said they now plan more tests to determine whether homes just outside the city of Clyde also have benzaldehyde in attics.

The families are seeking at least \$5 million in damages from Whirlpool and want the company to test the attics and clean them.

Warren Brown, whose 11-year-old daughter, Alexa, died of brain cancer in August 2009, said the families only want to find the truth.

"It is no secret now," he said.