

# Community Health Studies and Environmental Contamination

Communities may want or request health studies from their local or state health departments in response to news of environmental contamination and/or perceived high rates of disease.

## What is a health study?

A health study is a study that can potentially inform you and your community about health risks and outcomes that are related to environmental exposures. Health studies look for evidence of a shared experience (exposure to a chemical) that is capable of causing a disease of concern.

## Challenges to Conducting Health Studies

Health studies are not commonly carried out. They are only worthwhile if there is a strong possibility that the study could find a link between exposure and illness. There are many challenges to conducting health studies, including, but not limited to:

### Information needed is unavailable

- The amount of contaminants people are exposed to is hard to know; exposures can be short-term and intermittent.
- Because surveillance data doesn't exist for most chronic diseases, it is difficult to determine the expected rate of health conditions for comparison to determine whether the rate in a particular area is increased.

### Health studies may be unable to produce results

- Environmental exposures are often too low to cause observable health effects. Elevated rates of health effects are very hard to identify unless very high exposures occurred, similar to occupational exposures.
- Diseases typically have multiple causes. Health studies are not able to identify or establish the cause of any individual's illness. At best, they would only be able to find a correlation (association) between and exposure and an outcome – this is not the same as proof of cause and effect.
- A study that is unable to demonstrate a link between exposures and disease can be frustrating and disappointing and may be viewed as evidence of no relationship.
- Diseases can take a long time to develop

### Costs

- Any study would be very costly. It would require a large effort to develop the study design (identifying clear and focused objectives), and collect and analyze data.

## Alternatives to Health Studies

Before pursuing a health study, the goal of the study should be clear. What do you want to know and why do you want to know it? A health study may not help your community achieve its goal. There may be other ways that community members' efforts can make a difference in their community. Organizing community members to make sure their voice is heard on a variety of decision-making, educational, and pollution prevention opportunities may create a larger benefit.

## Resources

### Is a Health Study the Answer for Your Community?

This health study guide from the Boston University School of Public Health is an excellent resource for community groups who think that some form of environmental health investigation or study may be useful in their community.

[Is a health study the answer for your community? A guide for making informed decisions](https://www.bu.edu/sph/files/2015/03/HSG_Ch1to4_withcover_1-26-16.pdf)  
[https://www.bu.edu/sph/files/2015/03/HSG\\_Ch1to4\\_withcover\\_1-26-16.pdf](https://www.bu.edu/sph/files/2015/03/HSG_Ch1to4_withcover_1-26-16.pdf)

### From Exposure to Illness: Community Health Studies and Environmental Contamination

This website from the California Department of Public Health was created to share the experience and perspective of public health staff dedicated to studying links between environmental exposure to chemicals and health effects in California communities.

[Environmental Health Investigations Branch \(EHIB\)](http://communityhealthstudies.cdph.ca.gov/content/welcome.html)  
<http://communityhealthstudies.cdph.ca.gov/content/welcome.html>

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