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What are the Health Effects of Airport Noise and Airport Pollution?

Airport noise and pollution linked to increased health problems

By [Larry West](#), About.com

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Dear EarthTalk: What are the health and environmental issues associated with the airport noise and air pollution at airports?

-- John Cermak, via e-mail

Researchers have known for years that exposure to excessively-loud noise can cause changes in blood pressure as well as changes in sleep and digestive patterns -- all signs of stress on the human body. The very word "noise" itself derives from the Latin word "noxia," which means injury or hurt.

Airport Noise and Pollution Increases Risk for Illness

On a 1997 questionnaire distributed to two groups--one living near a major airport, and the other in a quiet neighborhood--two-thirds of those living near the airport indicated they were bothered by aircraft noise, and most said that it interfered with their daily activities. The same two-thirds complained more than the other group of sleep difficulties, and also perceived themselves as being in poorer health.

Perhaps even more alarming, the European Commission, which governs the European Union (E.U.), considers living near an airport to be a risk factor for coronary heart disease and stroke, as increased blood pressure from noise pollution can trigger these more serious maladies. The E.U. estimates that 20 percent of Europe's population -- or about 80 million people -- are exposed to airport noise levels it considers unhealthy and unacceptable.

Airport Noise Affects Children

Airport noise can also have negative effects on children's health and development. A 1980 study examining the impact of airport noise on children's health found higher blood pressure in kids living near Los Angeles' LAX airport than in those living farther away. A 1995 German study found a link between chronic noise exposure at Munich's International Airport and elevated nervous system activity and cardiovascular levels in children living nearby. And a 2005 study published in the prestigious British medical journal, *The Lancet*, found that kids living near airports in Britain, Holland and Spain lagged behind their classmates in reading by two months for every five decibel increase above average noise levels in their surroundings. The study also associated aircraft noise with lowered reading comprehension, even after socio-economic differences were considered.

Citizen Groups Concerned About Effects of Airport Noise and Pollution

Living near an airport also means facing significant exposure to air pollution. Jack Saporito of the [U.S. Citizens Aviation Watch Association](#) (CAW), a coalition of concerned municipalities and advocacy groups, cites several studies linking pollutants common around airports--such as diesel exhaust, carbon monoxide and leaked chemicals--to cancer, asthma, liver damage, lung disease, lymphoma, myeloid leukemia, and even depression. CAW is lobbying for the clean up of jet engine exhaust as well as the scrapping or modification of airport expansion plans across the country.

Another group working on this issue is Chicago's [Alliance of Residents Concerning O'Hare](#), which lobbies and conducts extensive public education campaigns in an

effort to cut noise and pollution and rein in expansion plans at the world's busiest airport. According to the group, five million area residents may be suffering adverse health effects as a result of O'Hare, only one of four major airports in the region.

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