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

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Airport noise and pollution linked to increased health problems

From [Larry West](#), former About.com Guide

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

-- *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 patterns -- all signs of stress on the human body. The very word "noise" itself derives from the Latin word "noxia," which means harm.

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--the airport group indicated they were bothered by aircraft noise, and most said that it interfered with their daily activities. The airport group reported more 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 a health hazard. It estimates that 10 percent of Europe's population -- or about 80 million people -- are exposed to airport noise levels it considers unhealthy and a health hazard.

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 found higher blood pressure in kids living near Los Angeles' LAX airport than in those living farther away. A 1995 German study on noise exposure at Munich's International Airport and elevated nervous system activity and cardiovascular levels in children living near airports published in the prestigious British medical journal, *The Lancet*, found that kids living near airports in Britain, Holland and Sweden were behind their classmates in reading by two months for every five decibel increase above average noise levels in their surroundings. The study also found that 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](#), a coalition of concerned municipalities and advocacy groups, cites several studies linking pollutants common around airports--such as carbon monoxide and leaked chemicals--to cancer, asthma, liver damage, lung disease, lymphoma, myeloid leukemia, and even depression. He also notes the impact 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 research in an effort to cut noise and pollution and rein in expansion plans at the world's busiest airport. According to the group, five percent of the population living near O'Hare is suffering adverse health effects as a result of O'Hare, only one of four major airports in the region.

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