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Brown County air poses health risk, study says

Contaminant tests rank water supply among best in state

BY TONY WALTER • TWALTER@GREENBAYPRESSGAZETTE.COM • JULY 8, 2008

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The quality of drinking water in Brown County is good, but the air quality is not, according to a study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute.

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The study revealed dangerous exposure to the risks of cancer and respiratory hazards in the air in the county in comparison to the 71 others in the state. Only five counties are rated worse.

Jessica Athens, lead author for the annual report, attributed Brown County's poor air quality to its location in an industrial corridor.

"Not all emissions there come from your county, but the emissions there do contribute to it," she said.

When looking at air quality, the study measured four indicators — cancer risk, respiratory hazards, measures of tiny particles of solid or liquid suspended in a gas and ozone levels.

Only 10 counties received better scores than Brown County on water quality, a tribute to the two water pipe systems pumping Lake Michigan water into the county. The study looked at the nitrate level in drinking water.

While contaminants in air and water have been documented for years as dangers to public health, the study included the impact of the built environment — particularly urban design — on the counties' environmental health.

As expected, the more urban areas graded more poorly and the rural counties graded better in most areas.

Brown County's built environment, which includes housing with increased risk of lead and percent of children younger than 6 who tested positive for lead poisoning in 2006, came in at No. 42 among the 72 counties in the state, the study said.

Researchers also considered the risk of radon, the second leading cause of lung cancer, and whether community residents can walk, bicycle or use public transportation.

"Transportation is really important for a lot of health factors," Athens said. "It contributes to excess pollution."

The results of the study should influence community leaders to take steps to improve the quality of life, authors said.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Residents of Brown County are more at risk of exposure to cancer and respiratory hazards in the air than most residents of the 71 other counties in the state, according to a study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute. The following chart shows the rankings of area counties relative to all 72 counties in the state on environmental health. The higher the number, the higher the environmental or health risk.

County	Air quality	Water quality	Built environment	Overall rank
Brown	67	11	42	39
Door	58	52	36	58
Kewaunee	56	26	40	37
Marinette	33	14	32	14
Oconto	21	19	12	10
Shawano	36	56	51	47

Source: University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute

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