

NIH launches largest oil spill health study

February 28 2011

A new study that will look at possible health effects of the Gulf of Mexico's Deepwater Horizon oil spill on 55,000 cleanup workers and volunteers begins today in towns across Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.

The GuLF STUDY (Gulf Long-term Follow-up Study) is the largest health study of its kind ever conducted among cleanup workers and volunteers, and is one component of a comprehensive federal response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The study is being conducted by the National Institute of [Environmental Health Sciences](#) (NIEHS), part of the National Institutes of Health, and is expected to last up to 10 years. Many agencies, researchers, outside experts, as well as members of the local community, have provided input into how the study should be designed and implemented.

"Over the last 50 years, there have been 40 known oil spills around the world. Only eight of these spills have been studied for human health effects," said Dale Sandler, Ph.D., chief of the Epidemiology Branch at NIEHS and principal investigator of the GuLF STUDY. "The goal of the GuLF STUDY is to help us learn if oil spills and exposure to crude oil and [dispersants](#) affect physical and mental health."

Over time, the GuLF STUDY will generate important data that may help inform [policy decisions](#) on health care and health services in the region. Findings may also influence responses to other [oil spills](#) in the future.

"We are enrolling workers and volunteers because they were closest to

the disaster and had the highest potential for being exposed to oil and dispersants," said Sandler.

The GuLF STUDY will reach out to some of the 100,000 people who took the cleanup worker safety training and to others who were involved in some aspect of the oil spill cleanup. The goal is to enroll 55,000 people in the study. Individuals may be eligible for the study if they:

- Are at least 21 years old
- Did oil spill cleanup work for at least 1 day
- Were not directly involved in oil spill cleanup but supported the cleanup effort in some way, or completed oil spill worker training

Working from lists of people who trained or worked in some aspect of the oil spill response, the GuLF STUDY will contact potential participants by mail, inviting them to take part in the study.

The study was developed to make participation as easy and convenient as possible. In addition, the GuLF STUDY incorporates safeguards to protect the privacy and confidentiality of personal information.

All participants will be asked to complete an initial telephone interview, and provide updated contact information once a year. During the telephone interview, participants will be asked questions about the work they did with the oil spill cleanup, and about their health, lifestyle, and job history. About 20,000 participants will be invited to take part in the second phase of the study, which involves a home visit and follow-up telephone interviews in subsequent years. Small samples of blood, urine, toenail clippings, hair, and house dust will be collected during the home

visit, and clinical measurements such as blood pressure, height and weight, urine glucose, and lung function will be taken.

If at any time in the course of the study, the need for mental or medical health care is evident, participants will be given information on available healthcare providers or referred for care. The study leaders have up-to-date information on healthcare providers and a medical referral process in place as part of the study. Materials will be available in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

The NIH is funding the GuLF STUDY. A small part of the funds have been provided by BP made to NIH specifically for research on the health of Gulf area communities following the spill, though BP is not involved in the study.

More information: For more information, call the GuLF STUDY toll-free number at 1-855-NIH-GULF (1-855-644-4853) or visit the GuLF STUDY Web site at www.niehs.nih.gov/GuLFSTUDY

Provided by National Institutes of Health

Citation: NIH launches largest oil spill health study (2011, February 28) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-02-nih-largest-oil-health.html>

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