

## Gulf Health Problems Blamed on Dispersed Oil

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DAUPHIN ISLAND, Alabama – *BP says it is no longer using toxic dispersants to break up the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. Gulf Coast residents claim otherwise, and say they have the sicknesses to prove it.*

On Aug. 5, Donny Mastler, a commercial fisherman who also works on boats, was at the Dauphin Island Marina.

“I was with my friend Albert, and we were both slammed with exposure,” Mastler, told IPS, referring to toxic chemicals he inhaled that he believes are associated with BP’s Corexit dispersants. “We both saw the clumps of white bubbles on the surface that we know come from the dispersed oil.”

Both of their eyes were watering and their throats were burning, so Albert went to sit in his air-conditioned truck, while Mastler headed home.

“I started to vomit brown, and my pee was brown also,” Mastler said. “I kept that up all day. Then I had a night of sweating and non-stop diarrhea unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.”

BP has been using two oil dispersants, Corexit 9500 and Corexit 9527, both of which are banned in Britain. More than 1.9 million gallons of dispersant has been used to date on the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster.

Pathways of exposure are inhalation, ingestion, skin, and eye contact. Health impacts include headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pains, dizziness, chest pains and tightness, irritation of eyes, nose, throat and lungs, difficulty breathing, respiratory system damage, skin irritation and sensitisation, hypertension, central nervous system depression, neurotoxic effects, genetic damage and mutations, cardiac arrhythmia, and cardiovascular damage, among several others.

Not along ago, at the same marina, WKRG News 5 took a water sample to test for dispersants. The sample literally exploded when it was mixed with an organic solvent separating the oil from the water.

Bob Naman, the chemist who analysed the sample, told the station, “We think that it most likely happened due to the presence of either methanol or methane gas or the presence of the dispersant Corexit.”

As for Mastler’s physical reaction to his exposure, Hugh Kaufman, an EPA whistleblower and analyst, has reported this of the effects of the toxic dispersants:

"We have dolphins that are hemorrhaging. People who work near it are hemorrhaging internally. And that's what dispersants are supposed to do...And, for example, in the Exxon Valdez case, people who worked with dispersants, most of them are dead now. The average death age is around 50. It's very dangerous, and it's an... economic protector of BP, not an environmental protector of the public."

By early July, the Alabama Department of Public Health said that 56 people in Mobile and Baldwin Counties had sought treatment for what they believed were oil disaster-related illnesses.

Mastler had a previous exposure when he was working on a boat for a BP contractor and brought aboard an oil-covered absorbent pad he found in the water. That exposure, too, found Mastler with rashes on his arms, a soar throat, and nausea. He told IPS he knows many island residents who stay inside to avoid toxic fumes that blow in from the Gulf.

BP claims to have conducted air monitoring of oil-affected areas. A written statement by the company says, "The monitoring data shows that few people, if any, are exposed to levels of oil or dispersants that have even the potential to cause any significant adverse health effects."

Many scientists and doctors disagree.

"The dispersants used in BP's draconian experiment contain solvents such as petroleum distillates and 2-butoxyethanol," Dr. Riki Ott, toxicologist and marine biologist, told IPS.

"Solvents dissolve oil, grease, and rubber. Spill responders have told me that the hard rubber impellers in their engines and the soft rubber bushings on their outboard motor pumps are falling apart and need frequent replacement...Divers have told me that they have had to replace the soft rubber o-rings on their gear after dives in the Gulf and that the oil-chemical stew eats its way into even the Hazmat dive suits," Ott said.

"Given this evidence, it should be no surprise that solvents are also notoriously toxic to people, something the medical community has long known," Dr. Ott added. "In 'Generations at Risk', medical doctor Ted Schettler and others warn that solvents can rapidly enter the human body: They evaporate in air and are easily inhaled, they penetrate skin easily, and they cross the placenta into fetuses. For example, 2-butoxyethanol is a human health hazard substance: It is a fetal toxin and it breaks down blood cells, causing blood and kidney disorders."

Even the federal government has taken precautions for its employees. U.S. military officials decided to reroute training flights in the Gulf region in order to avoid oil and dispersant tainted-areas.

Public health agencies operating in the region have told their researchers who test the air quality to wear respirators when they are offshore, and in preparation for a long-term study of health effects from the BP disaster, the U.S. Labour Department has started gathering data from thousands of workers.

Meanwhile, physical evidence around the Gulf continues to mount daily. Ongoing reports of fish kills and wildlife deaths are a daily occurrence now.

On Aug. 5, in Port St. Joe, Florida, city officials closed a public boat ramp following an unexplained fish kill in St. Joseph's Bay that caused hundreds of dead fish and crabs to wash ashore. Witnesses sighted a brown, sludgy material roughly six miles offshore.

"My voice is gone," Mastler, speaking to IPS with a gravelly voice. "Another time I was at the marina and got exposed again, I could smell the oil. I've got a lot of burning in my mouth right now."

On Aug. 8 he said that his urine was still "brown", but said he was starting to feel "a little better". Given that Mastler already had a chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, he believes he is "like the canary in the coal mine" with dispersant exposure.

Over the last six weeks, IPS has spoken with several people along the Gulf Coast who have complained of skin rashes, respiratory problems, nausea, headaches, burning eyes, and other problems they believe to be associated with BP's toxic dispersants.

Mastler told IPS he chose not to work for BP because he never trusted them.

"That's why I never went to BP, and I'm not going to, and I don't appreciate the people they let die over this, and how they're making us sick, and we've already had some deaths around this island," he added, "They put untrained people out on the water, with faulty equipment, and with faulty respirators."

On Wednesday, Mastler was still suffering.

"I'm still feeling terrible. I'm about to go to the doctor again right now. I might end up in the hospital. I'm short of breath, the diarrhea has been real bad, I still have discolouration in my urine, and the day before yesterday I was coughing up white foam with brown spots in it."

Mastler plans to file a claim against BP for his medical expenses.

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