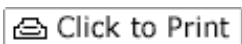


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Smokestack effect: 'What if we're next?'

Page 3 of 5 of USA TODAY's special report on toxic air and America's schools.

Cancer found Matt Becker before he turned 16. It gave him nosebleeds that lasted for hours and a melon-size tumor inside his chest. It kept him in the hospital for weeks at a time, a tube draining quarts of fluid from the lining of his lungs. It stole his sophomore year of high school and almost took his life.

"I never thought a kid my age could go through what I went through," he says now, as calmly as if he were recounting a boring day at school. For eight years, Matt went to school across the street from his house, at Saylor Park School in the Cincinnati neighborhood of the same name.

Now, at 17, he's back in the classroom, in a different school not far from where he lives with his parents and younger brother. His cancer, a non-Hodgkin lymphoma, was diagnosed in 2006 and has since gone into remission, and his life seems much the same as it was before he got sick.

He goes fishing and shoots pool. His hair, closely cropped, has grown back brown and full. Except for a 7-inch purple scar along his right shoulder blade — where doctors went in for exploratory surgery — cancer appears to have left no marks.

Matt knows better. His life has barely begun, but already he harbors a fear no child deserves: He worries that the chemotherapy needed to save his life may have left him sterile. "There's a good chance," says his mother, Pam.

The causes of many cancers, especially those in children, are varied and often unknown. Epidemiologists usually fail to pinpoint the culprits, and no one knows what caused Matt's cancer. His mother is haunted by a fear: that the same chemicals that prompted the shutdown of Meredith Hitchens Elementary, 2 miles away, might be to blame.

Like most kids, Matt spent much of his childhood outdoors. He remembers seeing and smelling what came out of the plastics plant. But, like most kids and many parents at schools across the country, he seldom considered what he was breathing and how it might affect his health.

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After the diagnosis, "my doctor ... asked me if there was any kind of pollution where I lived," Matt recalls. "It never really crossed my mind how bad it could be."

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The model used by USA TODAY indicated the school where Matt spent kindergarten through eighth grade — Saylor Park — and his home across the street were touched by the same chemicals that led to the closure of Hitchens. Although the concentrations of carcinogens outside Matt's school were not nearly as high as those found at Hitchens, the model indicated elevated levels there, too.

Ohio EPA's Koval, who supervised monitoring at Hitchens, says concentrations from the model showed cancer risks at Saylor Park would have been about six times higher than what the state considers acceptable.

The company cited by the Ohio EPA — Lanxess Corp. — no longer runs the plastics plant. But a company official who used to manage the Addyston facility says state regulators overstated the dangers. "The situation wasn't so dire that there was a serious public risk," says A.J. "Sandy" Marshall, now president and managing director for Lanxess Inc., the company's Canadian subsidiary. In 2005, Lanxess reported emitting 55,000 pounds of butadiene and acrylonitrile, both considered carcinogens by the Ohio EPA.

Marshall says the state EPA used flawed or outdated studies to claim that cancer risks were high. Although Marshall says Lanxess took major steps to curb its emissions, he says the company does not believe the 369 kids moved from Hitchens faced any serious dangers.

The Ohio EPA says otherwise.

In its air-quality study issued in December 2005, the agency explained how it determined the risks outside Hitchens were 50 times higher than acceptable. The state considers an "acceptable" cancer risk as one additional cancer for every 100,000 people, based on the idea that residents would breathe the air there for 70 years.

At Hitchens, the air showed concentrations of chemicals that the state concluded could cause 50 more cancers for every 100,000 people. It also noted that "children may be at higher risk" than adults.

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During the years Matt was growing up, Koval says, equipment problems at the plastics plant meant emissions of one of the carcinogens probably were much worse than what monitoring found. That's because an industrial flare, a tall flame used to burn off butadiene, wasn't working properly, Koval says. That problem, Koval says, and fewer regulations on what the plant could emit likely meant butadiene was being released at levels Koval calls "alarming."

Lanxess' Marshall says the company believes it ran the flare properly and met its permit requirements. How much butadiene Matt or the children at Hitchens breathed will never be clear.

Marshall cites a study released in 2006 by the state and county health departments, which found a higher-than-expected number of cancers in Addyston and concluded that "smoking history and multiple other risk factors are likely to play a role" in the excess cancers. But the study also said that "exposures from the Lanxess facility cannot be ruled out" as a cause. It never examined cases in Matt's Saylor Park neighborhood, nor did the state monitor there.

Children's health experts such as physician Landrigan say "it's plausible" that Matt's cancer might be related to his exposure to the chemicals. Too little is known — about childhood cancer and toxic chemicals — to ever be certain, and Landrigan made clear he did not examine Matt or his medical records.

Lanxess' Marshall also cannot say. "I feel for the family," he says of the Beckers. "When these diseases hit, there certainly is a lot of questioning as to what happens, what causes it and so on."

That's no comfort to Pam Becker. She worries when Matt loses weight; every pound he drops might be the cancer returning. And she frets about her younger boy, Nick. At 13, he only half-jokes that he holds his breath near the plant.

"How guilty do we feel if we gave our kid this because of where we live and where we sent him to school?" Pam Becker

asks. "What if Nick's next? What if we're next?" [Continue to next page...](#)

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