Illness issue among neighbors

Common thread runs through group's woes

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One by one, each of the dozen or so neighbors nibbling fruit and chips in Colleen Chastain's kitchen in Godley on a rainy Thursday afternoon shared sagas of sicknesses that grew more eerily alike with each unfolding tale.

After Tammy West's daughter began passing out from severe seizures, she survived surgery for chiari, a rare condition caused by extra brain matter crowding the brain stem and spinal cord. Then, in December, doctors found a baseball-sized tumor on one of the girl's lungs. None of West's other four children, born before she moved to Godley in 1994, had any health problems, she said. Doctors told West her daughter's diseases were congenital, or caused by something that went wrong before the baby was born.

"I'm not too young I'm not too old," West said. "When doctors told me that, I didn't think to ask if it could be something in the water. I just thought "Oh, my God, my baby's got a tumor."

There's nothing unusual about the fact that West, in her 30s, recently had a hysterectomy. But so did three of her close neighbors.

Exelon and Federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission officials insist low levels of tritium showing up in monitoring wells around the plant pose no health risk. Last month, Will County Health Department Director James Zelko told people who live near the nuclear plant to drink bottled water if they are "uncomfortable" with water from their wells.

Bad taste lingers

But it's not just the tritium Godley residents are tasting. They still have a bad taste in their mouths from the effects of a 200 diesel spill, when the Exelon nuclear power plant dumped thousands of gallons of diesel fuel into the water supply.

Aleshia Reyes, whose mother drinks from her shallow well near a Godley waterway contaminated by the diesel spill and also suspected of carrying some of the tritiated water, said her mother had a hysterectomy after her uterus began "falling out" of her body.

Susan Butler came down with transfer myelitis, a one-time a form of multiple sclerosis, a week after the 2000 diesel spill.

Reyes ex-husband, who lived with her in Godley for more than five years, recently was diagnosed with advanced lymphoma, a cancer invading every lymph node in his body.
Jennifer Kimmel moved less than a block away from the Braidwood power plant about nine months ago. She encouraged her four kids to drink as much as they could of what she at first saw as healthy well water. Since then, her children have been "nothing but sick." With her doctor's help, Kimmel has been racking her brain to find something in the new home that could be causing the spate of sicknesses.

"The it came out about the tritium leaks and I think I've found the answer to my question," she said.

Neurological and development disorders, also known to be linked to even low levels of exposure to tritium, also abound on the two blocks around Godley. Mothers recited a laundry list of learning problems from attention deficit and obsessive-compulsive disorders to opposition defiant disorder.

Since moving back here, Reyes developed anxiety disorder, with panic attacks so severe she can hardly enjoy social occasions she used to love -- like county fairs and ball games. While he lived in Godley and drank well water, Reyes' ex-husband's bipolar disorder was so crippling he had to be hospitalized repeatedly, even though he was taking medication. Since he moved away, he's been fine.

Pets are getting sick right along with the people. Kimmel's two cats seemed fine one day and died the next, she said. Sharon Lacy's dog started having seizures since she moved to Godley a year and a half ago. Two of Susan Butler's three dogs developed seizures, too.

The only neighbor who didn't have an illness to talk about was 26-year-old Malyanda Pfeiffer. She and her husband moved to Godley just three months ago to take advantage of lower home prices and property taxes. She is furious her real estate agent didn't mention anything about tainted water.

Holding her two-month-old infant on her lap, Pfeiffer seemed dazed at the health horror stories her new neighbors told. Her baby is still OK, Pfeiffer said. But her Schnauzer hasn't stopped throwing up since they moved into their new house.

"I want out of here," she said.