

Children suffer most from exhaust fumes

Health agencies and an environmental watchdog have issued a warning about the effects of motor vehicle pollution on children's health.

The Auckland Regional Public Health Service, Auckland University paediatrics department and the Auckland Regional Council jointly issued the statement of concern on World Health Day on Monday.

It says Auckland suffers from air pollution levels that at times exceed World Health Organisation standards.

The statement says children are more vulnerable to the effects of air pollution than most adults.

Infancy and adolescence are the two periods of fastest growth in life.

"There is international evidence that these two age groups are at special risk to harm from breathing in polluted air," the statement says. "Babies and toddlers are especially vulnerable because their immune system is still developing and less able to protect them."

It says children living near high-traffic areas have higher rates of chronic cough and asthma, and are more likely to be admitted to hospital with respiratory problems.

"Most worrying of all is the evidence that suggests that babies in the first year of life are more likely to die from respiratory diseases if air pollution exposure is high, and may even be harmed before birth by polluted air breathed by their mothers."

The statement says there has been little research into the effects of air pollution on children.

A report commissioned by the Ministry of Transport last year found about 250 adults aged 30 and over in the Auckland region die prematurely each year because of the effects of air pollution.

American air pollution expert Michael Walsh visited Auckland last month and was surprised at the city's poor air.

The main culprits are minute particles emitted from vehicles and fires that lodge in people's lungs.

These invisible particles are a fraction of the size of a human hair and contain a carbon core with toxins attached.

Mr Walsh says studies in the United States show school students inhale a lot of these particles while travelling to and from school on buses without air conditioning.

He suspected the same would be true for New Zealand school buses.

The statement also expressed concern about the number of schools next to main roads, which puts children in more danger of inhaling polluted air.

The regional council monitors air quality on inner city streets to show levels of nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide or tiny particles. These exceeded World Health Organisation standards on 48 days in 2001 and on 35 days in 2002.

About 80 per cent of all air pollution in the Auckland region comes from motor vehicles.

New Zealand does not have compulsory vehicle emission tests, has worse petrol and diesel standards than most industrialised countries and many developing countries.

Included in the statement is a recommendation that people have their vehicles tuned regularly and use cars less often, and the public transport be improved.

It was sent to Prime Minister Helen Clark, ministers of health, transport, Auckland issues and the environment, to all Auckland MPs, mayors and councillors, and to industry organisations.