Wind Turbine Noise Doesn’t Cause Cancer, but This Does

A closer look at how generating electricity affects health

April 3, 2019 By Bob Barnett

Twitter had a field day when President Donald Trump bashed wind power, telling House Republicans: “They say the noise causes cancer.”

Tweeted @Pourmecoffee: “Get the Bose Cancer Cancelling headphones.”

Spoiler alert: Wind turbine noise does not cause cancer. There isn’t a scintilla of evidence in scientific literature that the noise from wind turbines is linked to cancer.

And while wind turbine noise has been the subject of other health controversies, even here the research is mostly reassuring. Evidence about its effects on sleep and mood is conflicting—some studies find effects, others none. But recent studies have found no evidence that wind turbine noise affects the risk of heart attacks or stroke, birth defects, high blood pressure or diabetes. The only firm finding: Some people find it annoying to live near a wind farm. But, then, of course, many wind farms are now being built very far from where people live, such as in the ocean or in sparsely populated areas of the country.

On the other hand, indirect evidence suggests that wind farms may reduce the national burden of cancer—particularly lung cancer—if they replace coal-fired electrical generating plants. Air pollution from the fine particulate matter that coal plants spew is linked to a higher risk of early death from lung cancer and cardiovascular disease.

The latest study, titled “A global perspective on coal-fired power plants and burden of lung cancer,” published in the journal Environmental Health, looked at data from 13,581 coal-fired plants in 83 countries from 2000 to 2016. The more energy produced by coal in a region, the researchers conclude, the higher the risk for lung cancer in men and women. By 2025, they estimate, coal-fired power plants will be responsible for more than 1.37 million cases of lung cancer around the world.

Currently, coal provides 27 percent of the electricity in the United States, while wind power provides about 7 percent. Coal as a source of electricity is declining, however, while wind power is expanding rapidly across the United States. That may lead to many more people breathing easier

in the years to come—and less lung cancer.

Click here to learn more about lung cancer.

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