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## Flavoring suspected in lung disease cases

Up to 5 factory workers may suffer from illness that destroys tiny airways; federal probe launched

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SACRAMENTO BEE

**SACRAMENTO** - Federal health officials have launched a nationwide investigation of working conditions in flavoring factories after the discovery of a devastating lung disease among two former California workers and possibly three others in the Los Angeles area.

At the same time, a group of 21 California legislators and the nation's two largest food-industry labor unions are urging state job-safety regulators to issue an emergency order restricting workers' exposure to vapors from an artificial butter flavoring. The flavoring chemical, called diacetyl (di-As-ittle), has been strongly linked to the disease, called bronchiolitis obliterans.

The two actions arise in response to recent news of the latest confirmed victim, a 44-year-old woman in the Los Angeles area, and growing concerns about the safety of America's 3,700 other workers on the flavoring production lines.

While the number of confirmed cases to date is small, federal and state health investigators said they have only just begun to collaborate and look beyond the three Southern California flavoring plants where the known and suspect victims worked.

"A concerted effort is really being made across many agencies to address this problem and really find out what is needed to protect these workers," said Barbara Materna, California's chief of occupational health.

The agency considered best equipped for that job began looking for solutions last week, starting with a tour of the Los Angeles-area plant where the latest known victim worked.

The National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, or NIOSH, a research arm of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, dispatched an industrial hygienist and a pollution control engineer to examine chemical handling at the Carmi Flavor and Fragrance Co. factory in the City of Commerce.

Carmi is the first of several plants the agency plans to visit soon in the flavoring industry centers of Southern California, the Midwest and the East Coast, said Larry Reed, the agency's deputy director of field studies in Cincinnati.

A team of five or more technicians will be measuring chemical exposures and engineering solutions to contain vapors in the rooms where artificial flavors are developed, produced and tested for quality control, Reed said. The team will include some of the same specialists who helped the popcorn industry in the Midwest develop ways to control workers' exposure to diacetyl, he said.

NIOSH director John Howard ordered the national study in May, soon after the agency learned that a second California flavoring worker had developed the life-threatening lung disease in as many years.

"Even though the number of people with this disease may be relatively low, we take this condition very seriously," said Fred Blosser, NIOSH's chief spokesman.

Bronchiolitis obliterans is a rare and potentially fatal disease that literally obliterates the bronchioles -- the lungs' tiniest airways -- resulting in drastically reduced breathing capacity. Some workers have developed the condition within their first year on the job.

The flavoring industry began medically screening workers in California a year ago. Companies later struck a deal with the California Occupational Health and Safety Administration to continue evaluating employees -- rather than having state regulators do the job at the risk of possible citations. The National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver has conducted most of the breathing tests.

"Our preliminary analyses of 224 workers from 8 California flavor companies found no flavor workers with severe airflow abnormalities based on screening lung function testing," the medical center's Dr. Cecile Rose said in a recent e-mail to the Sacramento Bee.

"Only one worker had a moderate decrease in airflow, and this worker was reported to the state and removed from further exposure," Rose said.

The federal vapors study, which has strong support from the Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association -- the industry's largest trade group -- is expected to take up to three years, Reed said.

In the meantime, state health officials said they won't hesitate to offer interim recommendations to improve workplace safety.

"We need to tell employers sooner than the time it takes to do a very sophisticated study," the state health department's Materna said.

The group of California lawmakers, however, said government needs to act more aggressively to prevent new outbreaks of the life-threatening disease in the estimated 30 flavoring plants statewide.

Earlier this month, they urged Cal-OSHA to immediately adopt a temporary standard limiting workers' exposure to diacetyl.

Sen. Deborah Ortiz, D-Sacramento, chairwoman of the Senate Health Committee, spearheaded the petition, which included endorsements from the head of the Assembly Health Committee and the chairmen of the labor committee in both legislative chambers.

The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union and the California Labor Federation separately filed a similar petition with the Cal-OSHA Standards Board. The federal OSHA has not indicated whether it will take action in response to the unions' plea.