

# Minnesota Department of Health

Helping Minnesotans who have concerns about environmental toxins and cancer



The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) actively works to protect Minnesotans' health and prevent serious diseases like cancer. MDH works behind the scenes with families, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces to create conditions that support the health of all Minnesotans, no matter where they live.

## The Environmental Health Division (EHD) of MDH focuses on the many conditions in the environment that affect health.

The “environment” includes the areas where we live, learn, work, worship, and play. It’s made up of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and other conditions we may not control, but which can affect our health. While most significant risks of developing cancer come from lifestyle factors, such as smoking, exposures to certain chemicals in the environment may contribute to an individual’s risk of developing cancer in some cases. Also, sources of significant pollution, such as industrial manufacturing and heavy vehicle traffic, are often located closer to lower income communities and communities of color, increasing the risk of exposure to pollutants which may cause cancers.

EHD staff members are frequently contacted by people seeking more information about cancer and environmental exposures. This includes people living near contaminated sites, parents of children with cancer, and people who are concerned about cancer clusters. At the same time, cancer occurrences are more common than many people realize, and some who contact EHD need information about cancer and the environment to better understand common and potential risk factors.

## A PROCESS GROUNDED IN COLLABORATION, CONSENSUS, AND EQUITY

Clients at EHD asked Danie Watson and The Watson Group to help them improve their outreach and effectiveness by listening intentionally to members of disproportionately affected communities, and tailoring messaging and communications to be responsive to community needs, as well as providing accurate information to all Minnesotans about cancer risk.

**In Phase 1**, The Watson Group, working collaboratively with EHD, completed qualitative communications research—focus groups and key informant interviews with people who had contacted MDH, and with subject matter experts. The resulting data were analyzed to better understand the communications needs of target audiences.

*“What should we do if we’re concerned? Is there someone at MDH we can contact to walk us through the process? I need an [action plan]. When MDH or MPCA finds a hot spot, what do you do about it? Are resources provided? Are residents notified?”*

– Interview participant



## KEY FINDINGS LED TO CLEAR MESSAGING GUIDANCE:

- Participants said that when responding to inquiries, **MDH should respond with compassionate concern, understanding, reassurance, and explicit recognition of factors creating historical trauma in marginalized communities.**
- **Respectful, reciprocal, and collaborative communications are desired; some participants are seeking a dialogue with, and response** from MDH.
- Knowledge levels about possible exposures to hazardous substances in the environment and concerns about links between toxic chemicals and cancer varied; more education is needed.
- MDH EHD will benefit from working through its community-led partner organizations to **develop culturally informed materials,** and to **engage these partners in outreach.**
- **Plain-language versions** of information should accompany scientific explanations.

“People are looking for a science-based approach explained in plain language that’s not condescending... Conversations with MDH were like talking with someone you know—friendly, professional.” – **Interview participant**

## RESEARCH-DRIVEN COMMUNICATIONS LEAD WITH COMPASSION

In **Phase 2**, Danie Watson partnered with Mary Pat McNeil of MP+G Marketing Solutions to develop a video and eight information sheets about cancer and the environment—grounded in the research—and to test these communications with members of the target audiences. Danie and Mary Pat also provided recommendations and content, navigation, and graphic changes for the EDH website.

We tested the animated video with our focus groups, finalizing the script and visuals based on their feedback. From their responses, we know the video provides an empathetic and informational overview of cancer and the environment in an easy-to-comprehend, factual, and compassionate manner. While sharing sometimes daunting statistics along with known cancer-causing risk factors, we’ve been told the video also provides hope by sharing healthy ways to improve one’s risks along with links to resources for more information. The video will be embedded in Environmental Health Division’s home page and used by educators during outreach presentations to the public. It may also appear in social media posts.

With the addition of the video and incorporating its accompanying people-friendly graphics throughout, the new Environmental Health Division website is now a warmer, more welcoming, and easier-to-navigate site within the Minnesota Department of Health website. The detailed, peer-reviewed information sheets are available to the public as downloadable PDFs and will also serve as handouts for in-person meetings, focus groups, and presentations. We welcome you to visit the newly updated site and take a look for yourself:

[www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment](http://www.health.state.mn.us/cancerandenvironment)



Watson Group Marketing specializes in communications for government and nonprofit organizations. We share a commitment to health, education, sustainability, and equity.



Watson Group Marketing worked with MP+G Marketing Solutions, a partner chosen for their strong branding, strategy, and creative services.