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The haze that kills

When it comes to air quality, ‘particulate matter’ particularly matters.

We recently realized that, while we were busy worrying about the ozone and toxic gases in Houston’s air, we missed a more solid class of gunk befouling our lungs, “particulate matter,” scientists call it, or “particle matter” – or when they tire of all those syllables, plain old “PM.”

PM includes any too-tiny-too-see bit of solid or liquid stuff that floats in the air; soot and dust and sand, chemicals and aerosols, smoke from grills and wildfires, tailpipe emissions from diesel-burning 18-wheelers and gas-burning cars, emission from petrochemical flares and ocean-going tankers, and even the driveway grit that you neighbor’s SUV kicks up as she squeals out on her way to work. You know the haze that can make a Houston sunset especially spectacular? That’s PM.

Earlier this month the Environmental Protection Agency released its most recent assessment of the wafting particles. We’ll spare you the talk of 24-hour standards and micrograms per cubic meter, and cut to the chase: Harris County has an unhealthy level. And in its 209 “State of the Air” report card, the American Lung Association gave Harris County an F for particle pollution. We flat-out flunked.

How bad is that news? Very, very bad. We can cough or sneeze out the largest of those invisible particles, but the smaller ones, the kind involved in the EPA ruling, lodge themselves in our lungs or even slip into our bloodstreams. Inside our bodies, they wreak havoc – provoking asthma, cancer, heart attacks and strokes, researchers compare the damage to that of cigarette smoke.

The danger is greatest for children, the elderly and the medically fragile, but breathing particles affects even the most robust of us. Last year, The Journal of Occupational Environmental Medicine published a study based on Galveston lifeguards – a young, healthy bunch. Researchers measured their lung capacity three times a day and found that after a single, relatively high-particle day at the beach, the lifeguards showed reduced lung volume. That study is especially scary when you note that a high-particle day at the beach doesn’t come close to violating federal standards. Compared to a bad day near Houston’s Ship Channel, a day at the beach is....well, a day at the beach.

And what happens if you breathe particle pollution year-round, as we Houstonians do? According to one epidemiological study, that’s likely to shorten your life by one to three years.

We repeat: One to three years.

Cleaning up Harris County’s particle pollution isn’t just a quality of life issue. It’s a *quantity* of life issue. And one we need to address at every level – international, national, state and local.

The lives we save will be our own.