

# Department of Health and Human Services

## POPULATION HEALTH

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## **Water quality and health in the St Helens area**

Dear Resident,

Following the letter sent to you on 18 March 2010, we can now provide more information about the George River Water Quality Panel's findings and more detail about cancer rates in St Helens.

### **The key health messages**

1. The St Helens drinking water supply does not pose any health threat to residents.
2. There is nothing unusual about the rates or types of cancer in St Helens or the Break O'Day area.
3. Untreated river water (from any river) should not be used for household drinking or cooking. If mains water is not available, rainwater tanks are recommended.

### **Water quality**

The independent George River Water Quality Panel has reported there is nothing to be concerned about regarding the water in the George River. The panel found no evidence that pesticides or naturally occurring compounds in the George River pose a threat to the ecosystem, pacific oysters or human health.

The full report and related documents are available at [www.georgeriverwater.org.au](http://www.georgeriverwater.org.au)

The Break O'Day Council can also provide copies of a question and answer fact sheet from the Panel on request (phone 6376 7900) or via its website [www.bodc.tas.gov.au](http://www.bodc.tas.gov.au)

The George River has shown traces of chemicals on several occasions in the past, but these were well below human health guidelines and presented no health risk. Tasmania has one of Australia's most comprehensive and transparent water monitoring systems for pesticides. The Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment has carried out regular monitoring at 54 sites since 2005 and this monitoring will continue.

As part of earlier work on this issue, the Department of Health and Human Services commissioned follow-up research by a Flinders University scientist who, using a non-standard and sensitive technique, showed breast cancer cells were affected by a single sample of untreated George River water (not foam). Initial results of this follow-up research are expected within months.

The George River Water Quality Panel's findings show the use of carbon powder as an additional step in the treatment process is unnecessary. However, before discontinuing the powder, the Panel has recommended comparing raw and treated water quality from the treatment plant before and after use of the carbon powder. This will allow general treatment performance to be assessed.

Although the findings are unlikely to change the overall public health assessment, the Director of Public Health has asked that use of the carbon powder continue while this assessment is performed and until initial results are available from the Flinders University research.

## Use of untreated water

You should not use untreated river water for household drinking or cooking.

The George River is in very good condition, although there are traces of chemicals in the water from time to time. Efforts by all catchment users to eliminate these in the catchment need to continue.

While the river water is in good condition, this does not mean untreated river water is safe to drink. The main risk to your health from untreated river water is from bacteria, viruses and parasites that may be in the water.

Rainwater tanks are recommended in preference to river water for households **not** on the reticulated town water supply system. If river water is used, it is very important to disinfect, filter and regularly check its quality.

## Cancer rates

The Director of Public Health took the unusual step of asking the Tasmanian Cancer Registry to provide cancer data specifically for the area serviced by the St Helens drinking water supply. This was done to see if there was any sign of increased cancer rates in people who have been drinking the water. The Tasmanian Cancer Registry does not generally provide cancer data for areas smaller than local government areas because data for small populations can give a misleading picture.

The data was studied closely by epidemiologists. There was no evidence of a cancer cluster or abnormal cancer rates or trends in St Helens between 1993 and 2007 (the latest available).

From 1993 – 2007, 297 cancers were diagnosed in the St Helens water supply district. Given the population size and age, 300 cancers could have been expected in that time. There is no evidence of a cluster or increased rate of the less common cancer types mentioned on *Australian Story*.

The pattern of the cancer types in St Helens is similar to that of Break O' Day and Tasmania as a whole. Tasmania's overall cancer rates are higher than the national average, largely because of generally higher cancer risk factors (smoking, risky alcohol consumption, physical inactivity and poor diet) in Tasmania than elsewhere. People living in St Helens (like all parts of Tasmania) face an ongoing challenge from cancer because of the ageing population and lifestyle and socio-economic risk factors.

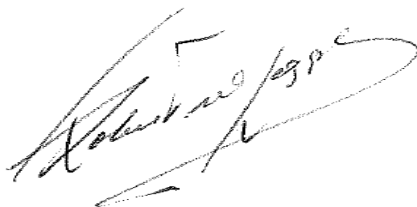
The *St Helens District Cancer Investigation Summary Report, DHHS, June 2010* and other related documents are available at [www.dhhs.tas.gov.au](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au)

We thank you for your patience over the past few months as the investigations have proceeded.

Your sincerely



Dr Roscoe Taylor  
Director of Public Health



Robert Legge  
Break O'Day Mayor



Barry Cash  
Chief Executive, Ben Lomond Water