

Wind Turbine Truth: Is Clean Energy Making You Sick?

In a world first, the controversial theory that the inaudible noise generated by wind farms can harm health is being put to the test in a Sydney sleep lab.

Starting tomorrow, researchers at Woolcock Institute of Medical Research will be exposing Sydneysiders to silent sound waves from wind turbines while they sleep to find out if the clean energy source could be making them sick.

“This is a contentious issue, with some residents living near wind farms certain that their health is being harmed and others seemingly unaffected,” says the study’s principal investigator, Associate Professor Nathaniel Marshall. “The science is murky on the topic so the sooner we can get some conclusive results the better.”

Australia is home to more than 75 wind farms housing about 2000 turbines. As the cheapest source of large-scale renewable energy, wind power use is rapidly expanding nationwide, with multiple new projects in the pipeline.

But with the growth has come a rise in complaints from residents living near wind farms who report experiencing headaches, dizziness and sleep disturbances which they attribute to the turbines. The symptoms, which some sufferers also say include nausea, tinnitus and irritability, are referred to collectively as wind turbine syndrome (WTS), which they link to infrasound, the inaudible sound that emanates from each generator.

The Woolcock will enlist 40 people, who report some sensitivity to audible sound and expose them to traffic noise, inaudible sound known as infrasound, or quiet over three weekend three-night visits to the institute’s purpose-built sound-isolated laboratory.

“As infrasound is inaudible and the order of the exposures is randomised and concealed from the participants, they won’t know which they have been exposed to,” Associate Professor Marshall explains.

The research team will run multiple tests to confirm each participant’s sleep quality, blood pressure, heart rate, neurocognitive functioning and symptoms related to WTS. Their levels of stress and anxiety will also be monitored. “We hope to find out whether wind turbine syndrome is real or whether the symptoms people experience are the result of so-called ‘nocebo effect’, where a person becomes convinced something harmless is making them ill,” Associate Professor Marshall says.

The study is one of two comprehensive trials funded at the Woolcock by the NHMRC over five years to bring some hard science to the wind turbine syndrome argument. The second project involves a group of residents in NSW’s Southern Highlands who will be randomly exposed to either infrasound or nothing for six months through a purpose-built device installed in their bedroom. These participants will also be “blinded” as to which exposure they are receiving.

The studies’ results will be available in 2-4 years and will be used by policymakers to inform public health and manage future growth of the clean energy source.

The Woolcock is seeking volunteers for the laboratory study. Participants cannot be shift workers, pregnant or breastfeeding, and must be willing to go without caffeine, alcohol and tobacco for the three study weekends. To enquire, please go to www.windfarmstudy.com

For information and interviews, contact Woolcock media consultant Lucy Williams on 0403 753 028.

Wind Turbine Syndrome

Some people who live near wind farms complain of dizziness, sleep disturbance and other symptoms referred to collectively as wind turbine syndrome. Sufferers argue WTS is caused by infrasound generated by wind turbines. This is controversial however, with many academics and others claiming the illness is purely psychological.

The Woolcock Wind Farm Trials

The NHMRC has awarded Woolcock Institute of Medical Research \$1.94m over five years to bring some hard science to the argument. It is running two trials, one lab-based and one in people's homes, to test conclusively whether infrasound from wind turbines has any effect on health.

About the Woolcock

The Woolcock Institute of Medical Research is one of the world's leading respiratory and sleep research organisations. It has over 200 medical researchers working to uncover the causes of disease, find better treatments and translate these into practice.

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