

Are wind turbines making people sick? Or is it all psychological?

By Brad Plumer , Updated: October 23, 2012

Every now and again, a story will pop up in some local newspaper about how the hums and vibrations from nearby wind farms are making people ill. Here's a [recent one](#) from Scituate, Massachusetts: "Residents have been complaining about headaches, nausea and sleepless nights caused by the town's new wind turbine near Driftway."

And yet, whenever public health researchers look into the issue, they find little evidence that "wind turbine syndrome" is an actual thing. [Here's](#) Simon Chapman, a professor of public health at the University of Sydney: "There have now been [17 reviews](#) of the available evidence about wind farms and health, published internationally. These are reviews of all studies, not single pieces of research. Each of these reviews have concluded that wind turbines can annoy a minority of people in their vicinity, but that there is no strong evidence that they make people ill."

So what's happening here? Why do these complaints keep popping up? Over at Discover Magazine, Keith Kloor [has an interesting post](#) wondering whether "wind turbine syndrome" might be due to what's known as the "nocebo" effect. That is, people read or hear news accounts of wind turbines giving other people headaches and nausea and then actually start feeling the symptoms themselves. This, Kloor notes, isn't unprecedented:

Such episodes have occurred throughout human history; earlier this year, a cluster of teenagers at an upstate New York high school [were suddenly afflicted with Tourette syndrome-like symptoms](#). The mystery outbreak was attributed by some speculation to environmental contaminants. But a doctor treating many of the students instead diagnosed them with a psychological condition called "conversion disorder" ...

Now, who knows. It's possible that further research will dig up an actual physiological link between wind turbines and the list of symptoms that a handful of residents have complained about. There's no reason to think the symptoms themselves are fake.

But for the time being, Chapman notes, what scientific studies *do* exist have mainly concluded that "pre-existing negative attitudes to wind farms are generally stronger predictors of annoyance than residential distance to the turbines or recorded levels of noise."

Related: By the way, it's worth noting that there's [considerably more scientific research](#) showing that particulate emissions (and other toxic pollutants) from coal-fired power plants really *do* cause illness — up to and including premature death. So that's the other side of the ledger.

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