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Study: Air particles increase disease risk
Jeff Donn – Associated Press Writer

The fine grit in polluted air boosts the risk of heart disease in older women much more powerfully than scientists realized, a big federally funded study has found, raising questions of whether U.S. environmental standards are strict enough.

The Environmental Protection Agency tightened its daily limit for these tiny specks, known as fine particulates, in September. But it left the average annual limit untouched, allowing a concentration of 15 millionths of a gram for every cubic meter of air.

In this study of 65,893 women, the average exposure was 13 units, with two-thirds of the subjects falling under the national standard. But every increase of 10 units, starting at 0, lifted the risk of fatal cardiovascular disease by about 75 percent. That is several times higher than in a study by the American Cancer Society.

“There was a lot of evidence previously suggesting that the long-term standard should be lower, and this is adding one more study to that evidence,” said Douglas Dockery, a pollution specialist at the Harvard School of Public Health.

He wrote an accompanying editorial for the study, which was published in today's *New England Journal of Medicine*. The University of Washington-based researchers worked from data collected for the Women's Health Initiative, a well-respected research project that previously showed the heart dangers of hormone supplements.

It has long been known that particulates can contribute to lung and heart disease, with women perhaps more susceptible than men to heart problems, perhaps because of their smaller blood vessels and other biological differences.