Exhaust fumes kill you slowly

By Barbara Ajilong

HAVE you ever been stuck in a traffic jam behind an old truck emitting thick black smoke? Do you know that this smoke can be fatal to your health? Not just in terms of a little cough, sneeze or allergy but as serious as death?

Simon Odeke, a mechanical engineer with Pearl Engineering Company, says these fumes are dangerous because they contain waste products like carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide that are harmful to the health of people when inhaled.

With the upsurge of cars in the country and the bumper-to-bumper traffic jams, it is hard to imagine how many people are inhaling all sorts of pollutants emitted from motor vehicles everyday.

The pollutants emitted include lead, benzene, carbon monoxide, particulates, carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxides. These reduce the air quality, posing environmental and health risks.

Carbon monoxide is poisonous when inhaled because it combines with haemoglobin and therefore prevents blood from carrying enough oxygen. This may lead to suffocation and the effects are more damaging to pregnant women and their foetuses.

Dr William Bazeyo, a public health expert says exhaust fumes affect the health of people exposed to them in ways that range from skin diseases, nasal irritation, other respiratory system infections and red eyes .

There have been cases of people with skin diseases like contact dermatitis because of these fumes settling on their skins, he says.

Bazeyo notes that people with hereditary diseases like asthma could be thrown into crisis attacks when exposed to these fumes.

Motor vehicle fumes also contain lead, which is one of the metals with the most damaging effects on human health and is still used in some grades of petrol (gasoline) today. Lead interferes with functions of the brain and kidneys and exposure reduces people’s intelligence.

Bazeyo said studies have shown that people who work in fuelling stations are more susceptible to lead poisoning, which affects their central nervous system. Observations show that these workers are usually friendly in the mornings but as the day wanes, they become more irritable and aggressive

because they inhale the lead in the motor vehicle fumes.
Emissions of such pollutants are normally produced when engines are inefficient, particularly at low speeds and idling that is characteristic of traffic jams.
According to Bazeyo, people driving in cars in traffic jams are more affected by these fumes than the pedestrians because while they are closed in the cars, the pedestrians have better air circulation around them.
Jerry Nathanson, the author of the Third Edition of Basic Environmental Technology, says in his book that air pollution is most harmful to the very old and the very young.
Many elderly people may already suffer from some form of heart or lung disease, and their weakened condition can make them very susceptible to additional harm from air pollution.
The sensitive lungs of newborn babies are also susceptible to additional harm from dirty air.
Angela Apio an asthmatic banker says every time she drives through Kampala city during the rush hours, she is out of breath.
If I do not put my window up while driving, I end up wheezing and get shortness of breathe. that is why I move around with my inhaler, she says.
Juliet Nabirye, a teacher in one of the primary schools in Kampala, says going through a traffic jam in Kampala is a deplorable experience that usually leaves her coughing, sneezing and out of breath.
She employs the help of a handkerchief over her nose and mouth to protect her lungs from getting affected.
She also feels that taking in the fumes is as good as smoking a cigarette.
Bazeyo says many times, people suffer from problems that result from motor vehicle fumes, but they do not know the cause.
However, research has not been done to establish the extent of the problem and the relation to the car fumes in Uganda.
Major health effects are categorised as being severe and may even result in death. Chronic effects usually include respiratory illnesses such as bronchitis, emphysema, asthma and perhaps lung cancer. Temporary effects include periods of eye or throat irritation, coughing, chest pain, malaise and general discomfort.
In his book, Nathanson also says there is much evidence linking lung

cancer to air pollution, although the actual cause-effect relationship is still unknown.

Some of the facts that support the linkage are that lung cancer deaths are more frequent in urban areas compared to rural and carcinogens are typically found in polluted air.

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