Feelingfine

29th and Grove Groundwater Contamination

What Residents Need to Know

A lot of people don't realize there's contaminated groundwater in part of northeast Wichita. And even if you've heard about it, you may not know what it means for you or your family. Here's the story in a nutshell — and why it matters. Because understanding it is the first step to protecting your health.

Sponsored by The Wichita Black Nurses Association

Contaminated Groundwater?

How Did That Happen

The contamination didn't happen overnight.

The best understanding is that it started with a chemical spill near the Georgia-Pacific railroad tracks, just north of 29th and Grove.

That area sits at the north end of what's now Glen Dey Park.

Experts believe the spill may have happened sometime in the 1970s or 1980s — but it wasn't discovered until the 1990s.

Back then, rules were different.

It wasn't unusual for companies to dump chemical waste on the ground — or even into nearby streams.

There were few regulations, and less awareness about how dangerous that could be.

The first major federal law to control hazardous waste — the **Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA)** — took effect in 1976, with stronger enforcement rules rolling out in the early 1980s.

By then, contamination had already happened in many places across the country.

Wichita was no exception.

There were hundreds of contaminated sites identified across the city — many from a time when the long-term risks simply weren't understood.

Cruiser/K96 Lake Contamination

Cruiser Lake, often called K-96 Lake, sits near both the 29th and Grove contamination site and the former Johns' Sludge Pond site near K-96 and I-135. Because of its proximity to the contamination areas, KDHE tested the lake's water and sediment for TCE contamination in 2022 and found no evidence the lake had been impacted by the 29th and Grove spill.

However, the lake is known to have contamination from polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a different chemical that has also been found at the nearby Johns' Sludge Pond site — not the TCE spill connected to the Union Pacific rail yard. Due to the presence of PCBs in some fish in the lake, KDHE recommends restricting consumption of bottom-feeding fish — including buffalo, carp, sturgeon and suckers — and catfish to one serving per month.

Groundwater Contamination Discovered

The contamination was discovered during a construction project on 21st Street in Northeast Wichita. The contamination was traced back to the Union Pacific Railyard near 29th and Grove. That was 1994, but that information wasn't widely shared — especially not with the community.

In fact, a December 1996 article in the Wichita Eagle highlighted what it called the "Dirty Dozen," identifying the city's serious contamination sites.

The 29th and Grove spill wasn't on that list.

It did, however, include contamination at what was known as John's Sludge Pond — located southeast of the curve of K-96 and I-135.

Between 1951 and 1970, the Super Refined Oil Co., a used-oil recycling company, dumped about **400 truckloads of chemicals and oily sludge into a pit near 29th Street and Hydraulic.**

With manufacturing and oil refineries nearby, northeast Wichita had become, in many ways, a dumping ground.

Still, there was no mention of the 29th and Grove spill — at least not to the community — until 2003.

So What Exactly Was Spilled?

The main concern is a chemical called **TCE — trichloroethylene.**

It's a man-made chemical that was widely used by manufacturers and businesses, mostly to clean metal parts and equipment. It's also been used in things like paint removers and degreasers.

TCE was made in a laboratory in 1836 but was not produced for sale until1908. Widespread production began in Germany in 1920 and in the United States in 1925.

SURPRISING FACT

TCE was first used as a painkiller and as anesthesia. It was thought to be less toxic to the liver than chloroform and less flammable than ether. It was given to women during childbirth for decades. It was banned for that use in the U.S. in 1977 because of concerns about harm to newborn babies but was still used in Europe until the 1980s.

Years ago, TCE could be found in products like:

- Paint removers
- Spot removers (for fabrics)
- Adhesives and glues
- Cleaning solvents

Most of those uses have been **phased out or restricted** due to health concerns.

How The Spill Traveled 2.9 Miles South To Murdock

Groundwater isn't an underground lake. It's water filling tiny spaces between sand, gravel and rock—more like a soaked sponge beneath the ground. The soil and rock stay packed in place, but the water can move slowly through those spaces, usually downhill or toward areas of lower pressure.

When TCE reaches that groundwater, some of it dissolves into the water and begins moving with it. But it doesn't move perfectly. Some of it sticks to soil along the way, slowing it down. And some gets trapped in small pockets underground, where it doesn't move at all.

Over time, those trapped pockets slowly release TCE into the water, continuing to feed the contamination. That's how a plume forms—spreading with the flow of groundwater while also being continually replenished from pockets left behind, **forming what's known as a plume, or a long, spreading area of contaminated groundwater.**

The speed of that movement depends on the type of soil. In tighter soils like clay, groundwater may move only a few feet per year. In sandier areas, it can move much faster—sometimes hundreds of feet per year. For a plume to travel nearly 3 miles since the 1970s, groundwater would likely have been moving on the order of **300 feet per year**—fast for groundwater, but realistic in sandy, gravel-rich conditions.

What Happens When TCE is Spilled?

When TCE is spilled, it doesn't just sit there.

Some of it can evaporate into the air. But a lot of it can soak into the ground where it can get into well water or ground water, once it gets there.

That's what happened here.

A significant amount of the spilled TCE moved underground.

Once it gets into groundwater, it doesn't stay in one place.

It spreads.

And over time, that's exactly what happened.

By 1994, when it was first discovered, the contamination had already spread as far south as 21st Street.

Today, it has moved 2.9 miles south from the Union Pacific Railway yard – to as far south as Murdock. far south as Murdock, following the natural flow of groundwater beneath the surface.

BY THE NUMBERS: THE SPREAD

2.9 MILES
South from 29th & Grove to Murdock

UP TO 7 BLOCKS WIDE
Between Hydraulic (west) and Poplar (east)
2,800 Homes Inside the area

TENS OF THOUSANDS
People impacted over time

TCE Can Be Cancerous

TCE isn't just a chemical — it's a serious health concern.

It has been linked to several types of cancer, including kidney cancer, liver cancer, and non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

But cancer isn't the only risk.

Exposure has also been connected to problems with the immune system, liver and kidney damage, and developmental issues in children.

So How Are People Exposed?

It's not just about drinking the water.

You can be exposed in several ways.

Drinking or ingesting it is one of the most direct ways — whether it's through tap water or something as simple as water used in cooking.

Washing vegetables helps reduce risk, but it doesn't eliminate concern entirely if the water itself is contaminated.

But it can also happen **through the air.**

TCE can evaporate from contaminated water or soil and move into homes. That means people can **breathe it** in without even knowing it.

It can also happen through **skin contact.**

That could be kids playing in muddy areas, people gardening, or anyone working directly with the soil.

Even something like water sitting in a backyard or in a baby pool can become a concern if contamination is present.

In places like Glen Dey Park, where people gather, play, and spend time outdoors, concerns have also been raised about how close contamination may be to areas like open fields and football fields.

The key point is this:

Exposure doesn't always look obvious.

And many people may not realize the different ways it can happen.

Why You Should Get Tested

Study Shows Elevated Cancer Rates in Contamination Area

As more became known about TCE and its links to cancer, concerns grew for residents living near the 29th and Grove contamination site — many of whom had spent decades in the area without knowing they could have been exposed.

TCE has been associated with an increased risk of kidney, liver and biliary cancers, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, as well as other health effects.

With those risks in mind, Wichita city officials pushed for answers. They insisted that a formal health study be conducted to determine whether residents in the area were experiencing higher rates of those same illnesses.

The results of that study were released in May 2023.

Researchers examined nearly 2,800 addresses in the affected area and specifically looked at cancers tied to TCE exposure, including kidney cancer, renal pelvis cancer, urinary bladder cancer, and lymphoma. The study found a significantly higher incidence of liver and biliary tract cancers — 15.7 cases per 100,000 people, compared to 6.4 per 100,000 in Kansas and 8.0 per 100,000 in Sedgwick County. It also identified other concerns, including higher rates of low birth weight among infants.

Despite those findings, health officials urged caution. They said the study could not definitively link the elevated cancer rates to TCE exposure, noting that cancer can be influenced by many factors.

Still, for residents, the overlap was hard to ignore.

Community members and local leaders began urging people who live — or have lived — in the area to get screened, particularly for cancers associated with TCE. Efforts also began to secure funding to ensure testing would be available.

For many, the study marked a turning point — from uncertainty to action.

With the funding secured, the next step was building the team to carry out the testing.

Is My Water Safe To Drink?

It depends on where your water comes from.

If You Have A Private Well

If you live in the contaminated area and use a **private well**, the answer is simple:

DO NOT DRINK THE WATER.

Wells pull water directly from the groundwater — and that's where the contamination is.

That means the water can carry TCE.

It's also best to **avoid using that water for anything where you might come into contact with it.**

That includes:

- Drinking or cooking
- Filling a child's pool
- Letting kids play in it

The goal is to limit contact as much as possible.

Using the water in a garden is generally considered **lower risk**, especially if produce is washed well — but even then, reducing contact when possible is the safest approach.

If you have a private well used for drinking water, you're encouraged to contact the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE).

They can help arrange to have the well **closed at no cost to you**.

Call KDHE at **785-296-8896** for more information.

What Spill? Residents Say They Were Never Truly Informed

For many residents, a 2023 public meeting about the 29th and Grove groundwater contamination was the first time they learned the spill existed. But according to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, the state first attempted to notify the community in 2003.

KDHE says legal notices were issued and outreach efforts included mailers to residents. However, searches of archived editions of The Community Voice and Newspaper.com did not locate a legal notice about the spill from 2002 or 2003.

Even for those who vaguely remembered hearing something years earlier, many said the contamination never seemed urgent or dangerous.

When KDHE returned in 2023 to provide an update on cleanup efforts, and residents learned they were living above a TCE spill, the meeting quickly turned emotional and confrontational.

"It was an awakening," many residents said, questioning how contamination discovered in 1994 could remain largely unknown for decades.

Former Wichita City Councilmember LaVonta Williams called the situation "environmental racism," saying even as a councilmember she had never been informed about the contamination.

State officials acknowledged the earlier outreach had not reached enough people and pledged to improve communication moving forward.

For Decades, The Florence Family Drank The Water

For more than 70 years, Terrell Florence's family has lived in northeast Wichita, relying on well water they believed was safe.

Florence said his family moved into the neighborhood in 1954, and at times as many as 15 relatives lived in the home together. Like many families in the area, they drank the water, cooked with it, and used it every day — never knowing contaminated groundwater was beneath them.

Over time, cancer repeatedly struck the Florence family.

"Both my parents had some form of cancer. Three of my sisters have had cancer. My oldest brother has had cancer," Florence said.

He said many of the cancers involved the lymphatic system, one of the health concerns associated with TCE exposure.

Florence said the family knew for years that something about the water seemed different, but they were told it was likely minerals causing the unusual taste.

In 2023, uncomfortable with the free testing provided through KDHE, the Florence family paid for professional independent testing of the water at their northeast Wichita home. That testing found TCE contamination levels of 334 parts per billion in one part of the house and 706 parts per billion in another. The EPA's acceptable drinking water limit for TCE is 5 parts per billion.

Terrell Florence sits on the porch of his northeast Wichita home with his great-grandson. Florence said his family lived in the area for decades, relying on well water before learning their property was located in the path of the 29th and Grove groundwater contamination plume.

"This is real," Florence said. "People need to stop thinking this can't affect them."

Now, his message to residents who lived, worked, attended school, or spent significant time in the contamination area is simple: Get tested.

Funding Secured to Provide Free Cancer Testing for Residents

When the health study revealed elevated rates of liver cancer in residents impacted by the groundwater contamination, local officials and community leaders moved quickly to secure funding to ensure residents could be tested at no cost.

The Kansas Health Foundation played a leading role in organizing the local match, helping bring together contributions from multiple partners to meet the state's requirement.

A number of state and local leaders were instrumental in securing the funding, including Gov. Laura Kelly, Sen. Oletha Faust-Goudeau, and Reps. Ford Carr, Susan Estes and K.C. Ohaebosim, along with other members of the Kansas Legislature who supported the effort.

At the local level, Wichita City Councilmember Brandon Johnson and Sedgwick County Commissioner Ron Baty helped move the process forward and ensure the funding could be used in ways that directly benefit residents.

You Can Get Tested For Free

Free health screenings are now available for people who may have been exposed to contaminated groundwater in northeast Wichita.

Who Should Get Tested

Anyone who has lived, worked, attended school or church — or spent significant time — in the impacted area should consider getting tested.

The contamination zone includes at least 2,800 homes, along with businesses, churches, and community facilities. Over the more than 50-year life of the spill, that adds up to tens of thousands of people who may have been exposed.

What Does the Testing Include

The FREE testing looks for specific health issues related to exposure to groundwater contamination, not levels of harmful chemicals in the body. You're asked to bring your driver's license or state issued ID.

Blood tests that:

- Measure liver and kidney function
- Look for anemia and other problems
- Screen for certain liver concerns

Urinalysis

A urine test checks for blood and other indicators of health.

Testing Partners

The Clearway Testing Program is the grant-funded effort and brings together authorized partners to provide **no-cost health screenings** for individuals who may have been impacted.

These Are the Testing Partners

GraceMed Health

1150 N. Broadway

Schedule online: https://www.gracemed.org/clearwaytesting

Call: (316) 866-2000

Hunter Health

527 N. Grove

Appointments required: Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Call: (316) 262-2415

Be sure to mention *"TCE testing"* or *"groundwater contamination testing."*

HealthCore Clinic

2707 E. 21st St. N.

Offers walk-in and appointment-based testing

Walk-In Hours:

- Monday – Thursday: 8:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.

Saturday: 8:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

- Walk-ins not available on Fridays

Appointments can also be requested online: https://healthcoreclinic.org/clearwaytesting

I Am Wichita Clinic/Love Medical Clinic & Spa

214 S. Road Road, #101

(316) 669-4770

I Am Wichita is also partnering with Clearway Testing to provide screenings as part of this community-wide effort.

Wichita Black Nurses

Providing community-based testing throughout the area.

For additional dates, visit: www.wichitabn.org

May & June WBNA Testing Dates and Locations

- **Sat., May 16, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.**

Greater St. Mary's Baptist Church

1648 E. 17th St. N.

- **Sat., May 30, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.**

Chisholm Trail Church of Christ

5833 E. 37th St. N.

- **Sat., June 8, 11 a.m. – 2 p.m.**

Carl Brewer Community Center

1349 N Ohio

Sat., June 13, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

St. Paul AME Church

1756 N. Piatt

Sat., June 20, 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

The Bridge Church

1329 E. 13th St. N.

Free Testing
For 29th & Grove

If you lived, worked, went to school, went to church, or spent time near 29th & Grove or surrounding neighborhoods from the 1970s to today, consider getting tested.

Clearway TESTING

Clearway Testing is a community-led effort that brings together local clinics and organizations to make it easier to:

- Understand potential exposure
- Receive health tests at no cost
- Connect with a licensed medical provider

Don't Wait
Get Your Free Health Test Today

Clearway Testing partners are here to help the 29th & Grove community.
Contact a testing partner today to get your free health test.

GraceMed HEALTH CLINIC
(316) 866-2000
gracemed.org/clearwaytesting

HealthCore CLINIC
(316) 691-0249
healthcoreclinic.org/clearwaytesting

HUNTER HEALTH
(316) 262-2415
hunterhealth.org/clearwaytesting

LOVE CLINIC & MED SPA
(316) 669-4770
loveclinicmedspa.com

WBNA WICHITA BLACK NURSES ASSOCIATION
(316) 249-1926
wichitabna.org

Progressive Alliance of Churches Together · PANO MARKETING · Project Access · SCWT · The Center · WMREF

Working Together With Trusted Community Partners

Learn more → ClearwayTesting.org

Health tests from Clearway partners are free through December 31, 2026 and include a blood and urine test. No insurance or ID needed. These tests check your health for possible effects from past groundwater contamination. Testing is quick and handled by trusted medical professionals. Eligibility: Free health testing is available through Clearway partners if you believe you may have been exposed to contaminated groundwater in Sedgwick County.

Clearway TESTING

Groundwater, Health, and You.

A Clear Way Forward:* *Free Health Testing

These tests look for health effects that may be linked to contaminated groundwater exposure.

FREE Health testing events provided by the Wichita Black Nurses Association for those in the 29th & Grove Area

- **Saturday, May 16, 2026** 10am–2pm
  St Mary Missionary Baptist Church
  1648 E 17th St N, Wichita, KS
- **Saturday, May 30, 2026** 9am–12pm
  Chisholm Trail Church of Christ
  5833 E 37th St N, Wichita, KS
- **Saturday, June 6, 2026** 11am–2pm
  Carl Brewer Community Center
  1329 E 13th St N, Wichita, KS
- **Saturday, June 13, 2026** 10 am-2 pm
  St Paul AME Church
  1756 N Piatt Ave., Wichita, KS
- **Saturday, June 20, 2026** 10 am-2 pm
  The Bridge Church
  2328 E 13th N, Wichita, KS