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Watch What You're Breathing

An interview with Professor Greg Evans
Environmental Engineer, University of Toronto

How does air quality affect our lifestyles?

The air that we have surrounds us, it's part of us, it's in us, it's something that has shaped us over time, and it's now something that we are shaping. If you live near a very major road, it can be potentially impacting your health and, in fact, one in three Canadians live near major roadways.

We're trying to figure out how people are exposed, when they are exposed, so that they can adjust their lifestyles accordingly. What makes it complicated is it's really a system of where the pollution comes from, might be for example vehicles, and then where we are when we inhale it and what happens after we inhale it. The added twist is that we all respond differently, so knowing that there are some people who are exposed quite a bit more, some people who are exposed quite a bit less, that if we can figure this out we can take some positive steps.

How can we collaborate to change behaviour?

The work we do involves a lot of collaboration so we're very fortunate in that we collaborate with government agencies at the federal level, provincial level, municipal level, and that's really necessary because the work we do is all about the public. It's all about helping to put in policies, so we need government help that way, and it's all about creating change.

We're looking to help guide policy, at one level, and we're also looking to change behavior and it's the latter one that is so much more complicated. We all contribute to the problem. It's also important for people who are more vulnerable; knowing when they can jog, when they should be outside exercising and then when they shouldn't. And people don't have that information because air pollution is invisible. We can't see it, so we don't worry about it, and we don't worry about the emissions that we contribute. The investments we make today can either be detrimental or beautiful opportunities for our children.