

## Fifth Floor Work Environment FAQs

Last updated April 2, 2025

This compilation of frequently asked questions (FAQ) was created in response to questions and concerns raised by staff during the 3/21/2025 staff town hall and in other subsequent settings. This document will be updated as any new information becomes available. We have also created a special Vitals page where we will post information and updates.

### Background and Cases

*How has Newton-Wellesley Hospital responded to concerns raised by the reporting of brain tumor cases on the Fifth Floor?*

NWH has completed a rigorous, comprehensive, and in-depth environmental evaluation to establish the safety of our workplace. This safety evaluation was done by a multi-disciplinary group of experts including external reviewers:

- MGB Occupational Health Service (OHS)
- Mass General Brigham/Newton-Wellesley Facilities/Safety Officer
- Mass General Brigham Radiation Safety
- Triumvirate Environmental
- Hillmann Company
- Mass General Brigham/Newton-Wellesley Pharmacy

*How many brain tumor cases have been brought forward by staff members on the Fifth Floor? Are they cancer?*

Through 4/1/2025, 11 staff who have worked at some point and for varying durations on the Fifth Floor have been interviewed by the OHS.

- 6 cases were determined not to be brain tumors but rather other health concerns.
- 5 cases were determined to be brain tumors of 3 different types, all of which were benign (non-cancerous).
- The only type of benign (non-cancerous) tumor that had more than one case was meningioma.
- Note: OHS has not been approached by any other Fifth Floor staff members at this point. The information above reflects only cases which have been brought by staff members to OHS.

## Workplace Concerns

*Could brain tumor cases be related to wearing masks during the pandemic? The drinking water on the Fifth Floor? Use of x-rays? What about the pharmacy on the Fourth Floor?*

- OHS performed a comprehensive review of the medical literature as part of the investigation. There is no scientific evidence linking long-term mask use (including processing/re-wearing of masks) to the development of brain tumors. Regarding the decontamination process and the re-use of N-95 respirators during the pandemic, the Battelle decontamination system used vaporized hydrogen peroxide that resulted in a breakdown to water and oxygen, thus leaving no chemical contaminants.
- Water serving the hospital is tested regularly by the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA). Out of an abundance of caution, additional water samples from the tap and ice machines have been sent for additional testing by Triumvirate Environmental, an independent environmental testing firm. Those results should be available in the coming week.
- There were approximately 668 x-rays from portable machines performed on the Fifth Floor from 2020-2024; if one person had been present one meter away from the machine for all of these x-rays, the total radiation exposure is estimated to be about twice that of background (normal) exposure. Even if a staff member had been present for all of these x-rays, however, they would not have absorbed this much exposure (i.e., one meter from the machine) as we utilize appropriate x-ray safety techniques throughout the hospital.
- To make sure that there was not another, unknown, source of ionizing radiation on the Fifth Floor, radiation levels were surveyed across the Fifth Floor using Geiger counters. This did not find any abnormal/increased levels of ionizing radiation.
- The NWH pharmacy located on the Fourth Floor processes chemotherapy medications for our patients. These are handled within an independently ventilated, closed system and with appropriate precautions and controls that have been validated as part of this investigation. The hoods used in the Fourth Floor pharmacy have been installed and tested to ensure that they are functioning properly and safely ventilating away from the building. This system was re-tested by Triumvirate Environmental, an independent environmental firm, as part of the investigation, and was found to be operating properly.

## **Environmental and Equipment Concerns**

*Are cleaning products toxic? Could past renovations have released hazardous material?*

*Has air quality been tested?*

- Air quality testing was completed by Hillmann Company, an external, independent environmental firm. The only finding outside of normal range was slightly elevated levels of VOCs (volatile organic compounds), consistent with healthcare settings in which hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes are used. These are not unique to the Fifth Floor and are not dangerous or toxic.
- Maintenance logs and air quality data from prior renovations were reviewed. There was no indication of hazardous material or exposures.
- All MSDS (Materials Safety Data Sheets) for cleaning supplies used on the Fifth Floor were reviewed during the investigation and none are known to cause brain tumors.
- NWH has confirmed with the pest control vendor utilized for prior ladybug issues that glue traps were used; no pesticides were used in this remediation.

*Are there risks related to previous construction activity on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor? What about mold?*

- All construction at NWH was and is completed within Healthcare Facility Guidelines Institute (FGI) recommendations, requiring approved contractors and vendors. NWH uses an approved pre-construction risk assessment and infection control assessment process as required by CMS/Joint Commission.
- All projects are reviewed for potential hazardous materials prior to start of construction; if any hazardous materials are found within the boundaries of construction, they are tested and removed by approved remediation vendors prior to starting construction. This process involves notification and approval by state agencies prior to start of any work.
- NWH works with independent industrial hygienist firms to sample, test, and analyze all potential mold-bearing materials; if mold is found, the industrial hygienist dictates the course of remediation action. Approved disaster cleaning/remediation companies would remove impacted building materials and

the industrial hygienist performs final testing and clearance.

### **Investigation Details**

*Who performed the investigation? Was the testing done by independent (i.e. non-MGB) firms? When can we see the testing results?*

- The investigation was led by MGB Occupational Health and Safety following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. Assessments were performed by several internal (i.e. MGB/NWH) and external groups:
  - Mass General Brigham/Newton-Wellesley Facilities/Safety Officer
  - Mass General Brigham Radiation Safety
  - Triumvirate Environmental
  - Integra CE Services
  - Hillmann Company
  - Mass General Brigham/Newton-Wellesley Pharmacy
  - Massachusetts Water Resource Authority (water testing at source and city-levels)
- Scientific data/test result reports will be posted to Vitals on 4/2/2025 and can be accessed by any employee. These reports were also provided to the MNA (Massachusetts Nursing Association) on March 28, 2025.

### **Next Steps**

*Can additional staff come forward? What additional communication can we expect?*

- Staff members with concerns regarding diagnosis of a brain tumor are encouraged to come forward. Please reach out to Lisa McLoon ([REDACTED]@mgb.org) if you are or were a 5<sup>th</sup> floor staff member and have concerns. OHS will continue to take any additional information and cases into account over time.
- Leadership (unit-based and Hospital) will continue to round regularly through the Fifth Floor and other areas of the hospital to answer your questions.
- It is important that everyone have their questions answered. To that end we will be scheduling a follow-up town hall meeting for all Fifth Floor staff within the next week.
- Environment of Care rounds will occur on the Fifth Floor weekly. As always, if

you have an environmental concern, please notify your supervisor or complete a Worxhub ticket. Instructions are available [here](#).

Based on the results of the extensive and deliberate investigation described above, we want to reassure our dedicated team members and all of our patients that there is not an environmental risk at Newton-Wellesley Hospital.

We take this very seriously; our top priority is providing high-quality care in a safe and healthy environment for our staff and patients. Thank you.