

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about toluene. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. It's important you understand this information because this substance may harm you. The effects of exposure to any hazardous substance depend on the dose, the duration, how you are exposed, personal traits and habits, and whether other chemicals are present.

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Exposure to toluene occurs from breathing contaminated workplace air, in automobile exhaust, some consumer products paints, paint thinners, fingernail polish, lacquers, and adhesives. Toluene affects the nervous system. Toluene has been found at 959 of the 1,591 National Priority List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency

## What is toluene?

Toluene is a clear, colorless liquid with a distinctive smell. Toluene occurs naturally in crude oil and in the tolu tree. It is also produced in the process of making gasoline and other fuels from crude oil and making coke from coal.

Toluene is used in making paints, paint thinners, fingernail polish, lacquers, adhesives, and rubber and in some printing and leather tanning processes.

## What happens to toluene when it enters the environment?

☐ Toluene enters the environment when you use materials that contain it. It can also enter surface water and groundwater from spills of solvents and petroleum products as well as from leaking underground storage tanks at gasoline stations and other facilities.

☐ When toluene-containing products are placed in landfills or waste disposal sites, the toluene can enter the soil or water near the waste site.

☐ Toluene does not usually stay in the environment long.

☐ Toluene does not concentrate or buildup to high levels in animals.

## How might I be exposed to toluene?

☐ Breathing contaminated workplace air or automobile exhaust.

☐ Working with gasoline, kerosene, heating oil, paints, and lacquers.

☐ Drinking contaminated well-water.

☐ Living near uncontrolled hazardous waste sites containing toluene products.

## How can toluene affect my health?

Toluene may affect the nervous system. Low to moderate levles can cause tiredness, confusion, weakness, drunken-type actions, memory loss, nausea, loss of appetite, and

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hearing and color vision loss. These symptoms usually disappear when exposure is stopped.

Inhaling High levels of toluene in a short time can make you feel light-headed, dizzy, or sleepy. It can also cause unconsciousness, and even death.

High levels of toluene may affect your kidneys.

### **How likely is toluene to cause cancer?**

Studies in humans and animals generally indicate that toluene does not cause cancer.

The EPA has determined that the carcinogenicity of toluene can not be classified.

### **How can toluene affect children?**

It is likely that health effects seen in children exposed to toluene will be similar to the effects seen in adults. Some studies in animals suggest that babies may be more sensitive than adults.

Breathing very high levels of toluene during pregnancy can result in children with birth defects and retard mental abilities, and growth. We do not know if toluene harms the unborn child if the mother is exposed to low levels of toluene during pregnancy.

### **How can families reduce the risk of exposure to toluene?**

- ☐ Use toluene-containing products in well-ventilated areas.

- ☐ When not in use, toluene-containing products should be tightly covered to prevent evaporation into the air.

### **Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to toluene?**

There are tests to measure the level of toluene or its breakdown products in exhaled air, urine, and blood. To determine if you have been exposed to toluene, your urine or blood must be checked within 12 hours of exposure. Several other chemicals are also changed into the same breakdown products as toluene, so some of these tests are not specific for toluene.

### **Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?**

EPA has set a limit of 1 milligram per liter of drinking water (1 mg/L).

Discharges, releases, or spills of more than 1,000 pounds of toluene must be reported to the National Response Center.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has set a limit of 200 parts toluene per million of workplace air (200 ppm).

### **References**

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2000. Toxicological Profile for Toluene. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

**Where can I get more information?** For more information, contact the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Division of Toxicology, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-888-422-8737, FAX: 770-488-4178. ToxFAQs™ Internet address is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>. ATSDR can tell you where to find occupational and environmental health clinics. Their specialists can recognize, evaluate, and treat illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances. You can also contact your community or state health or environmental quality department if you have any more questions or concerns.

