Arsenic
Frequently Asked Questions

HIGHLIGHTS
Exposure to higher than average levels of arsenic occurs mostly in the workplace, near hazardous waste sites, or in areas with high natural levels. At high levels, inorganic arsenic can cause death. Exposure to lower levels for a long time can cause a discoloration of the skin and the appearance of small corns or warts.

WHAT IS ARSENIC?
Arsenic is a naturally occurring element widely distributed in the earth's crust. In the environment, arsenic is combined with oxygen, chlorine, and sulfur to form inorganic arsenic compounds. Arsenic in animals and plants combines with carbon and hydrogen to form organic arsenic compounds.

Inorganic arsenic compounds are mainly used to preserve wood. Organic arsenic compounds are used as pesticides, primarily on cotton plants.

WHAT HAPPENS TO ARSENIC WHEN IT ENTERS THE ENVIRONMENT?
- Arsenic cannot be destroyed in the environment. It can only change its form.
- Arsenic in air will settle to the ground or is washed out of the air by rain.
- Many arsenic compounds can dissolve in water.
- Fish and shellfish can accumulate arsenic, but the arsenic in fish is mostly in a form that is not harmful.

HOW MIGHT I BE EXPOSED TO ARSENIC?
- Eating food, drinking water, or breathing air containing arsenic.
- Breathing contaminated workplace air.
- Breathing sawdust or burning smoke from wood treated with arsenic.
- Living near uncontrolled hazardous waste sites containing arsenic.
- Living in areas with unusually high natural levels of arsenic in rock.

HOW CAN ARSENIC AFFECT MY HEALTH?
- Breathing high levels of inorganic arsenic can give you a sore throat or irritated lungs. Ingesting high levels of inorganic arsenic can result in death. Lower levels of arsenic can cause nausea and vomiting, decreased production of red and white blood cells, abnormal heart rhythm, damage to blood vessels, and a sensation of “pins and needles” in hands and feet.
- Ingesting or breathing low levels of inorganic arsenic for a long time can cause a darkening of the skin and the appearance of small “corns” or “warts” on the palms, soles, and torso.
- Skin contact with inorganic arsenic may cause redness and swelling.
- Organic arsenic compounds are less toxic than inorganic arsenic compounds. Exposure to high levels of some organic arsenic compounds may cause similar effects as inorganic arsenic.

HOW LIKELY IS ARSENIC TO CAUSE CANCER?
Several studies have shown that inorganic arsenic can increase the risk of lung cancer, skin cancer, bladder cancer, liver cancer, kidney cancer, and prostate cancer. The World Health Organization (WHO), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), and the EPA have determined that inorganic arsenic is a human *carcinogen* (cancer causing substance).

HOW DOES ARSENIC AFFECT CHILDREN?
We do not know if exposure to arsenic will result in birth defects or other developmental effects in people. Birth defects have been observed in animals exposed to inorganic arsenic.

It is likely that health effects seen in children exposed to high amounts of arsenic will be similar to the effects seen in adults.

HOW CAN FAMILIES REDUCE THEIR RISK FOR EXPOSURE TO ARSENIC?

- If you use arsenic-treated wood in home projects, you should wear dust masks, gloves, and protective clothing to decrease exposure to sawdust.
- If you live in an area with high levels of arsenic in water or soil, you should use cleaner sources of water and limit contact with soil.

IS THERE A MEDICAL TEST TO SHOW WHETHER I'VE BEEN EXPOSED TO ARSENIC?

There are tests to measure the level of arsenic in blood, urine, hair, or fingernails. The urine test is the most reliable test for arsenic exposure within the last few days. Tests on hair and fingernails can measure exposure to high levels or arsenic over the past 6-12 months. These tests can determine if you have been exposed to above-average levels of arsenic. They cannot predict how the arsenic levels in your body will affect your health.

HAS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MADE RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROTECT HUMAN HEALTH?

EPA has set limits on the amount of arsenic that industrial sources can release to the environment and has restricted or canceled many uses of arsenic in pesticides. EPA has set a limit of 0.01 parts per million (ppm) for arsenic in drinking water.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has set limits of 10 microgram arsenic per cubic meter of workplace air (10 $\mu g/m^3$) for 8 hour shifts and 40 hour work weeks.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

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.

For more information, contact:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
Division of Toxicology
1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32
Atlanta, GA 30333
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