Cyanide, Chemical Weapon

Cyanide is a rapidly acting, potentially deadly chemical that can exist in various forms. Cyanide can be a colorless gas, such as hydrogen cyanide (HCN) or cyanogen chloride (CNCl), or a crystal form such as sodium cyanide (NaCN) or potassium cyanide (KCN). Cyanide gas sometimes is described as having a “bitter almond” smell, but it does not always give off an odor, and not everyone can detect this odor. Cyanide is also known by the military designations AN (for hydrogen cyanide) and CK (for cyanogen chloride).

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Poisoning caused by cyanide depends on the amount of cyanide a person is exposed to, the route of exposure and the length of time that a person is exposed.

- Breathing cyanide gas causes the most harm. Cyanide gas is most dangerous in enclosed places where the gas will be trapped. Cyanide gas evaporates and disperses quickly in open spaces, making it less harmful outdoors. Cyanide gas is less dense than air, so it will rise. Cyanide prevents the cells of the body from getting oxygen. When this happens, the cells die. Cyanide is more harmful to the heart and the brain than other organs because the heart and brain use a lot of oxygen.
- Ingesting cyanide can be toxic as well.

HOW TO PREVENT DEATH WHEN EXPOSED TO CYANIDE

- Leave the area where the cyanide was released. Make efforts to keep as low as possible to the ground if there is even a remote possibility that cyanide is in the area.
- Move to an area with fresh air as quickly as possible. This helps reduce the possibility of death from exposure.
- If the cyanide release was outside, move away from the area where the cyanide was released. If the cyanide release was indoors, get out of the building.
- If leaving the area that was exposed to cyanide is not an option, stay as low to the ground as possible.
- Remove any clothing that has liquid cyanide on it. If possible, seal the clothing in a plastic bag, and then seal that bag inside a second plastic bag.
- Rinse the eyes with plain water for 10 to 15 minutes if they are burning or if vision is blurred.
- Wash any liquid cyanide from the skin thoroughly with soap and water. If cyanide is *ingested* (swallowed), do not induce vomiting or give fluids to drink. Seek medical attention right away. Stay calm. **Dial 911** and explain what has happened. Wait for emergency personnel to arrive.

Information courtesy of the US Government CDC. In times of an emergency, much of this material may not apply when it comes to specialized care and testing. These are guidelines to help you when that care is not available. Some of this information is very technical and difficult to understand, but hopefully someone will be available for help in treatment and understanding.

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