

2. RELEVANCE TO PUBLIC HEALTH

2.1 BACKGROUND AND ENVIRONMENTAL EXPOSURES TO COBALT IN THE UNITED STATES

Cobalt is a naturally-occurring element that has properties similar to those of iron and nickel. The largest use of metallic cobalt is in superalloys that are used in gas turbine aircraft engines. Cobalt compounds are used as pigments in glass, ceramics, and paints; as catalysts in the petroleum industry; as paint driers; and as trace element additives in agriculture and medicine.

Cobalt may be released to the environment by human activities, as well by weathering of rocks and soil. The primary anthropogenic sources of cobalt in the environment are from the burning of fossil fuels, application of cobalt-containing sludge or phosphate fertilizers, mining and smelting of cobalt-containing ores, processing of cobalt-containing alloys, and industries that use or process cobalt compounds. Cobalt released to the atmosphere is deposited onto soil or water surfaces by wet and dry deposition. In soils, cobalt generally has low mobility and strong adsorption. However its mobility increases in moist, acidic soils. In water, cobalt largely partitions to sediment and to suspended solids in the water column; however, the amount that is adsorbed to suspended solids is highly variable.

Exposure of the general population to cobalt occurs through inhalation of ambient air and ingestion of food and drinking water. In general, intake from food sources is much greater than from drinking water and air. The cobalt intake in food has been estimated to be 5.0–40.0 µg/day. Occupational exposure to cobalt occurs for workers in the hard metal industry (tool production, grinding, etc.) and in industries such as coal mining, metal mining, smelting and refining, cobalt dye painters, and the cobalt chemical production industry. The concentrations of cobalt in the air of hard metal manufacturing, welding, and grinding factories may range from 1 to 300 µg/m³, compared to normal atmospheric levels of 0.4–2.0 ng/m³.

While there is only one stable isotope of cobalt, ⁵⁹Co, there are many radioactive isotopes of cobalt. Of these radioactive isotopes, two are commercially important, ⁶⁰Co and ⁵⁷Co. ⁶⁰Co is produced by irradiating ⁵⁹Co with thermal neutrons in a nuclear reactor, and is used as a source of gamma rays for sterilizing medical equipment or consumer products, food irradiation, radiation therapy for treating cancer

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patients, and for manufacturing plastics. The general population is not significantly exposed to radioactive forms of cobalt. Cancer patients being treated with radiation therapy may be exposed to gamma rays from a ^{60}Co source; however, the effects of external exposure to gamma radiation is not unique to ^{60}Co , but is similar for all gamma-emitting radionuclides. Workers at nuclear facilities and nuclear waste storage sites may be exposed to potentially high levels of radioactive cobalt.

2.2 SUMMARY OF HEALTH EFFECTS

As a component of cyanocobalmin (vitamin B₁₂), cobalt is essential in the body; the Recommended Dietary Allowance of vitamin B₁₂ is 2.4 µg/day, which contains 0.1 µg of cobalt. Cobalt has been identified in most tissues of the body, with the highest concentrations found in the liver.

Following inhalation exposure to cobalt-containing particles, the primary target of exposure is the respiratory tract. Occupational exposure of humans to cobalt metal or cobalt-containing hard metal have reported primarily respiratory effects, including decreased pulmonary function, asthma, interstitial lung disease, wheezing, and dyspnea; these effects were reported at occupational exposure levels ranging from 0.015–0.13 mg Co/m³. Animal studies have further identified respiratory tract hyperplasia, pulmonary fibrosis, and emphysema as sensitive effects of inhaled cobalt on respiratory tissues. Many of the respiratory tract effects are believed to be the result of the generation of oxidants and free radicals by the cobalt ion. In particular, hard metal (a tungsten carbide/cobalt alloy) is a potent generator of free electrons, resulting in the generation of active oxygen species. However, some of the respiratory effects, such as cobalt-induced asthma, are likely the result of immunosensitization to cobalt.

Other sensitive targets of cobalt inhalation in humans include effects on the thyroid and allergic dermatitis, manifesting as eczema and erythema; it is believed that the allergic dermatitis is due, at least in part, to concurrent dermal exposure and the development of immunosensitization to cobalt.

Adequate chronic studies of the oral toxicity of cobalt or cobalt compounds in humans and animals are not presently available. The most sensitive endpoint following oral exposure to cobalt in humans appears to be an increase in erythrocyte numbers (polycythemia). This effect has been observed in both normal subjects and in patients who were anemic as a result of being anephric. However, treatment of pregnant women with cobalt did not prevent the reduction in hematocrit and hemoglobin levels often found during

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pregnancy. Exposure of humans to beer containing cobalt as a foam stabilizer resulted in severe effects on the cardiovascular system, including cardiomyopathy and death, as well as gastrointestinal effects (nausea, vomiting) and hepatic necrosis. However, the subjects in these studies were alcoholics, and it is not known what effect excessive alcohol consumption may have played in the development of the observed effects.

Following dermal exposure, the most commonly observed effect is dermatitis, as demonstrated by a large number of human studies. Using patch tests and intradermal injections, it has been demonstrated that the dermatitis is probably caused by an allergic reaction to cobalt, with the cobalt ion functioning as a hapten.

Available studies of the carcinogenic effects of cobalt in occupationally-exposed humans have reported mixed results, with both positive and negative results. Lifetime inhalation of cobalt sulfate resulted in increased tumor incidences in both rats and mice; NTP reported that there was some evidence of carcinogenicity in male Fischer 344 (F344) strain rats, and clear evidence of carcinogenicity in female F344 strain rats and male and female B6C3F1 strain mice following inhalation exposure. Oral data on the carcinogenic effects of cobalt and cobalt compounds are not available. IRIS does not report a cancer classification for cobalt or cobalt compounds. IARC has classified cobalt and cobalt compounds as *possibly carcinogenic to humans (Group 2B)*.

A more detailed discussion of the health effects of cobalt and cobalt compounds is presented in Chapter 3. An enhanced discussion of sensitive end points of stable cobalt toxicity is presented below.

Respiratory Effects. The primary effects of cobalt on respiratory tissues are seen following inhalation exposure, and include diminished pulmonary function, increased frequency of cough, respiratory inflammation, and fibrosis; reported effect levels in occupationally-exposed humans have ranged from 0.015–0.13 mg Co/m³. Animal studies have further identified respiratory tract hyperplasia, pulmonary fibrosis, and emphysema as sensitive effects of cobalt on respiratory tissues. A number of these effects are believed to be the result of the generation of oxidants and free radicals by the cobalt ion. *In vitro* exposure to soluble cobalt increases indices of oxidative stress, including diminished levels of reduced glutathione, increased levels of oxidized glutathione, activation of the hexose monophosphate shunt, and free-radical-induced DNA damage. Cobalt exposure also results in sensitization of the immune system, which may result in asthmatic attacks following inhalation of cobalt in sensitized individuals.

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Hard metal is a metal alloy with a tungsten carbide and cobalt matrix. It is used to make cutting tools because of its hardness and resistance to high temperature. Exposure to hard metal has been shown in a number of studies to cause respiratory effects, including respiratory irritation, diminished pulmonary function, asthma, and fibrosis, at exposure levels lower than those that would produce similar effects following exposure to cobalt metal alone (0.007–0.14 mg Co/m³). Studies suggest that cobalt and not tungsten carbide is the probable causative agent for the respiratory effects observed in hard metal workers (see Section 3.5). A mechanism by which hard metal may exert its effects has been proposed by a group of Belgian researchers. In this proposed mechanism, tungsten carbide, which is a very good conductor of electrons, facilitates the oxidation of cobalt metal to ionic cobalt (presumably Co²⁺) by transferring electrons from the cobalt atom to molecular oxygen adjacent to the tungsten carbide molecule. The result is an increased solubility of cobalt, relative to cobalt metal alone, and the generation of active oxygen species. *In vitro* evidence for this mechanism includes the ability of hard metal particles, but neither cobalt nor tungsten carbide alone at the same concentrations, to generate oxidant species and cause lipid peroxidation. Hard metal particles have also been shown to increase the levels of inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS), a gene responsive to oxidant stress.

Hematological Effects. Exposure to cobalt and cobalt compounds has been demonstrated to increase levels of erythrocytes and hemoglobin in both humans and animals. Davis and Fields reported increased (~16–20%) erythrocyte levels in six of six healthy men exposed orally to cobalt chloride (~1 mg Co/kg-day); erythrocyte counts returned to normal 9–15 days after cessation of cobalt administration. Increased levels of erythrocytes were also found following oral treatment of anephric patients (with resulting anemia) with cobalt chloride. The increase in hemoglobin resulted in a decreased need for blood transfusions. Treatment of pregnant women for 90 days with cobalt chloride, however, did not prevent the reduction in hematocrit and hemoglobin levels often found during pregnancy.

Increased levels of hemoglobin were observed in rats and guinea pigs, but not in dogs, exposed to cobalt hydrocarbonyl by inhalation. Polycythemia was reported in rats, but not mice, exposed to airborne cobalt sulfate. Significantly increased erythrocyte (polycythemia), hematocrit, and hemoglobin levels were found in animals treated orally with cobalt as either a single dose or with longer-term exposure. Of particular note is an 8-week study in rats, which reported dose- and time-related increases in erythrocyte number following oral administration of cobalt chloride.

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The mechanisms regarding cobalt-induced polycythemia are not well understood. Cobalt is thought to inhibit heme synthesis *in vivo* by acting upon at least two different sites in the biosynthetic pathway. This inhibitory activity might result in the formation of cobalt protoporphyrin rather than heme. Cobalt treatment also stimulates heme oxidation in many organs, due to the induction of heme oxygenase. Conversely, cobalt acts, through a mechanism believed to involve a heme-containing protein, to increase erythropoietin, which stimulates the production of red blood cells. The regulatory mechanisms behind this apparent dichotomy have not been fully elucidated.

Cardiac Effects. Cardiomyopathy has been reported in both humans and animals following exposure to cobalt. Occupational exposure of humans to cobalt-containing dust, either as cobalt metal or as hard metal, is believed to result in cardiomyopathy characterized by functional effects on the ventricles and enlargement of the heart, but the exposure levels associated with cardiac effects of inhaled cobalt in humans have not been determined. Rats exposed to 11.4 mg Co/m³ for 13 weeks developed a mild cardiomyopathy; however, rats and mice exposed to 1.14 mg Co/m³ for 2 years showed no signs of cardiomyopathy.

Beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy was observed in people who heavily consumed beer that contained cobalt sulfate as a foam stabilizer. The beer drinkers ingested an average of 0.04 mg Co/kg/day to 0.14 mg Co/kg/day for a period of years. The cardiomyopathy was characterized by sinus tachycardia, left ventricular failure, cardiogenic shock, diminished myocardial compliance, absence of a myocardial response to exercise or catecholamine, enlarged heart, pericardial effusion, and extensive intracellular changes (changes in the myofibers, mitochondria, glycogen, and lipids). The beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy appeared to be similar to alcoholic cardiomyopathy and beriberi, but the onset of beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy was very abrupt. It should be noted, however, that the cardiomyopathy may have also been due to the fact that the beer-drinkers had protein-poor diets and may have had prior cardiac damage from alcohol abuse. Studies in animals, and limited human data, have supported this possibility, as much greater oral exposure levels (on the order of 8-30 mg Co/kg-day) are necessary to induce cardiac effects.

The mechanism for cobalt-induced cardiomyopathy is not presently understood. Exposure to cobalt may result in accumulation in cardiac tissues, and is thought to stimulate carotid-body chemoreceptors, mimicking the action of hypoxia. Microscopic analysis of the hearts of those with beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy revealed fragmentation and degeneration of myofibers and aggregates of abnormal mitochondria. These mitochondrial changes are indicative of disturbances in energy production or

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utilization may possibly be related to cobalt effects on lipoic acid. Cobalt irreversibly chelates lipoic acids under aerobic conditions. Lipoic acid is a required cofactor for oxidative decarboxylation of pyruvate to acetyl CoA and of α -ketoglutarate to succinate. In the myocardium of rats treated with cobalt, oxidation of pyruvate or fatty acids is impaired. However, the relative contribution of these mechanisms to the cardiac effects of cobalt has not been determined.

Dermal Effects. Dermatitis is a common result of dermal exposure to cobalt in humans. Using patch tests and intradermal injections, it has been demonstrated that the dermatitis is probably caused by an allergic reaction to cobalt. Exposure levels associated with the development of dermatitis have not been identified. It appears that cobalt metal may be a more potent allergen than some cobalt salts, as Nielsen et al. demonstrated that daily repeated exposure to aqueous cobalt salts did not result in hand eczema in patients known to have cobalt allergy. In animals, scabs and denuded areas were found after six doses of 51.75 mg Co/kg (5 days/week) as dicobalt octacarbonyl were applied to the shaved abdomens (uncovered area of approximately 50 cm²) of guinea pigs. By the 11th dose, the lesions disappeared. No adverse effects were observed in vehicle controls (methyl ethyl ketone). It is not known whether or not a similar reaction would result from metallic or inorganic forms of cobalt.

Immunological Effects. Exposure of humans to cobalt by the inhalation and dermal routes has resulted in sensitization to cobalt. Exposure to inhaled cobalt chloride aerosols can precipitate an asthmatic attack in sensitized individuals, believed to be the result of an allergic reaction within the lungs. Similarly, the dermatitis seen in dermally-exposed subjects is likely the result of an allergic reaction, with cobalt functioning as a hapten. IgE and IgA antibodies specific to cobalt have been reported in humans. There is evidence that cobalt sensitivity in humans may also be regulated by T-lymphocytes; a human helper T-lymphocyte cell line specific for cobalt (CoCl₂) has been established. Cobalt may also interact directly with immunologic proteins, such as antibodies or Fc receptors, to result in immunosensitization. *In vitro*, cobalt(III) has been shown to reduce the proliferation of both B and T lymphocytes, as well as the release of the cytokines IL-2, IL-6, and IFN-Gamma. Interrelationships exist between nickel and cobalt sensitization, with cross-reactivity between the two having been reported in several studies.

Radioactive Cobalt. Exposure to radioisotopes of cobalt is also a human health concern. Energy released by radioactive isotopes can result in significant damage to living cells. Both ⁶⁰Co and ⁵⁷Co emit beta particles and gamma rays, which may ionize molecules within cells penetrated by these emissions and result in tissue damage and disruption of cellular function. The most important exposure route for

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radioisotopes of cobalt is external exposure to the radiation released by the radioisotopes. It should be noted that there is nothing unique about the effects of external exposure to ^{60}Co and ^{57}Co when compared to other gamma- and beta-emitting radionuclides.

Generally, acute radiation doses below 15 rad (0.15 Gy) do not result in observable adverse health effects. At doses in the range of 15–50 rad (0.15–0.5 Gy), subclinical responses such as chromosomal breaks and transient changes in formed elements of the blood may be seen in sensitive individuals. Symptoms of acute radiation syndrome begin to be observed at radiation doses above 50 rad, characterized by transient hematopoietic manifestations, nausea and vomiting, and moderate leukopenia at doses near 100 rad (1 Gy), progressing through more serious hematopoietic symptoms, clinical signs, and gastrointestinal symptoms with increasing dose (100–800 rad or 1–8 Gy), and usually death in persons receiving total doses $\geq 1,000$ rad (10 Gy). Other health effects from acute or continued high-level exposure to ionizing radiation may include reproductive, developmental, and latent cancer effects.

Signs and symptoms of acute toxicity from external and internal exposure to high levels of radiation from ^{60}Co and ^{57}Co are typical of those observed in cases of high exposure to ionizing radiation in general. Depending on the radiation dose, symptoms may include those typical of acute radiation syndrome (vomiting, nausea, and diarrhea), skin and ocular lesions, neurological signs, chromosomal abnormalities, compromised immune function, and death.

Acute or repeated exposure of humans or animals to ionizing radiation (from radioisotopes of cobalt or other radioactive elements) may result in reduced male fertility, abnormal neurological development following exposure during critical stages of fetal development, and genotoxic effects such as increased frequencies of chromosomal aberrations, sister-chromatid exchanges, and micronucleus formation.

Due to the ionizing properties of radionuclides such as ^{60}Co and ^{57}Co , increased cancer risk would be expected among exposed individuals. However, studies of increased cancer risk specifically associated with exposure of humans to radioactive cobalt isotopes were not located. Similarly, studies of the carcinogenic effects of radioactive cobalt isotopes in animals were not located.

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2.3 MINIMAL RISK LEVELS (MRLs)*Inhalation MRLs*

- An MRL of 0.0001 mg cobalt/m³ has been derived for chronic-duration inhalation exposure (>365 days) to cobalt.

An MRL for inhalation exposure to cobalt was derived for chronic duration only. The chronic inhalation MRL of 0.0001 mg cobalt/m³ was based on a no-observed-adverse-effect-level (NOAEL) of 0.0053 mg cobalt/m³ and a LOAEL of 0.0151 mg cobalt/m³ (both NOAEL and LOAEL values were adjusted for continuous exposure prior to MRL derivation) for decreases in forced vital capacity (FVC), forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁), forced expiratory flow between 25 and 75% of the FVC (MMEF), and mean peak expiratory flow rate (PEF) in diamond polishers (Nemery et al. 1992); a further discussion of the results and limitations of this study is presented in Appendix A.

The National Toxicology Program (NTP) has conducted a chronic-duration carcinogenicity study in rats and mice. Exposure of rats and mice to aerosols of cobalt (as cobalt sulfate) at concentrations ranging from 0.11 to 1.14 mg cobalt/m³ for 2 years resulted in a spectrum of inflammatory, fibrotic, and proliferative lesions in the respiratory tract of male and female rats and mice (NTP 1998). Squamous metaplasia of the larynx occurred in rats and mice at exposure concentrations of 0.11 mg cobalt/m³, with severity of the lesion increasing with increased exposure concentration. Hyperplastic lesions of the nasal epithelium occurred in rats at concentrations of 0.11 mg cobalt/m³, and in mice at concentrations of 0.38 mg cobalt/m³. Both sexes of rats had greatly increased incidences (>90% incidence) of alveolar lesions at all exposure levels, including inflammatory changes, fibrosis, and metaplasia. Similar changes were seen in mice at all exposure levels, though the changes in mice were less severe. The study in diamond polishers, being a well-conducted study in humans, was selected as the critical study for the derivation of a MRL because it examined a human population and identified a NOAEL, neither of which occurred in the NTP study. The chronic inhalation MRL was derived by adjusting the NOAEL of 0.0053 mg Co/m³ for intermittent exposure (adjusted to 0.0013 mg/m³ to simulate continuous exposure), and applying an uncertainty factor of 10 (for human variability). It should be noted that this MRL may not be protective for individuals already sensitive to cobalt.

An acute inhalation MRL was not derived because the threshold was not defined for human effects and animal studies reported effects that were serious and occurred at levels above those reported in the few

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human studies. An acute-duration study of hard metal exposure in humans (Kusaka et al. 1986b) was not utilized for MRL derivation because the toxicity of hard metal is not directly due to cobalt metal, but rather to an interaction between cobalt metal and tungsten carbide. An intermediate-duration MRL was not derived because available studies did not examine the dose-response relationship at low doses; the chronic inhalation MRL should be protective for intermediate exposures (see Appendix A).

Oral MRLs

- An MRL of 0.01 mg Co/kg-day has been derived for intermediate-duration oral exposure (<365 days) to cobalt.

An intermediate-duration MRL of 0.01 mg Co/kg/day was derived based on a LOAEL of 1 mg cobalt/kg-day for polycythemia as reported in a study by Davis and Fields (1958). The authors exposed six men to 120 or 150 mg/day of cobalt chloride (~1 mg Co/kg/day) for up to 22 days. Exposure to cobalt resulted in the development of polycythemia in all six patients, with increases in red blood cell numbers ranging from 0.5 to 1.19 million (~16–20% increase above pre-treatment levels). Polycythemic erythrocyte counts returned to normal 9–15 days after cessation of cobalt administration. An 8-week study in rats (Stanley et al. 1947) also reported increases in erythrocyte number, with a no-observed-effect-level (NOEL) of 0.6 mg/kg-day and a lowest-observed-effect-level (LOEL) of 1 mg/kg/day. The intermediate oral MRL was derived by dividing the LOAEL of 1 mg Co/kg-day by an uncertainty factor of 100 (10 for use of a LOAEL and 10 for human variability).

Oral MRL values were not derived for acute or chronic exposure to cobalt. An acute MRL was not derived because the reported effects in animals were serious and occurred at levels above those reported in the few human oral studies. No chronic oral studies were available in animals; the chronic studies of beer-cobalt cardiomyopathy (Alexander 1969, 1972; Bonenfant et al. 1969; Morin et al. 1967, 1971; Sullivan et al. 1969) were not used because the effects were serious (death) and because the effects of concurrent alcoholism were not controlled for. Therefore, a chronic oral MRL was not derived for cobalt.

MRLs for External Exposure to Cobalt Isotopes

Two MRLs have been derived for ionizing radiation (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry 1999) and are applicable to external exposure to radioisotopes of cobalt:

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- An MRL of 400 mrem (4.0 mSv) has been derived for acute-duration external exposure to ionizing radiation (14 days or less).

The acute MRL is based on results of a study by Schull et al. (1988) in which neurological effects of radiation, measured by intelligence test scores, were evaluated in children 10–11 years of age who had been exposed at critical stages of fetal development (gestation weeks 8–15) during the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. When IQ scores were regressed on radiation dose estimates, IQ diminished linearly with increasing dose, resulting in an estimated decrease in IQ score of approximately 25 points per 100 rad (or 100 rem in dose equivalent) or 0.25 points/rem (25 points/Sv). To derive the MRL of 400 mrem (4.0 mSv), Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (1999) divided the dose associated with a predicted change of 0.25 IQ points/rem by an uncertainty factor of 3 (for human variability and/or the potential existence of sensitive populations). Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (1999) noted that a change in IQ points of 0.25 is less than the reported difference of 0.3 IQ points between separated and unseparated identical twins (Burt 1966).

The USNRC set a radiation exposure limit of 500 mrem (5 mSv) for pregnant working women over the full gestational period (USNRC 1991). For the critical gestational period of 8–15 weeks, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry believes that the acute MRL of 400 mrem (4 mSv) is consistent with the USNRC limit and could be applied to either acute (0–14-day) or intermediate (15–365-day) exposure periods.

- An MRL of 100 mrem/year (1.0 mSv/year) above background has been derived for chronic-duration external ionizing radiation (365 days or more).

The MRL is based on the BEIR V (1990) report that the average annual effective dose of ionizing radiation to the U.S. population is 360 mrem/year (3.6 mSv/year), a dose not expected to produce adverse noncancerous health effects. This dose is obtained mainly by naturally-occurring radiation from external sources, medical uses of radiation, and radiation from consumer products. An uncertainty factor of 3 (for human variability) was applied to the NOAEL of 360 mrem/year to derive the MRL of 100 mrem/year.