

WHAT IS ATSDR?

ATSDR is the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a federal public health agency. ATSDR is part of the Public Health Service in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ATSDR is not a regulatory agency like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Created by Superfund legislation in 1980, ATSDR's mission is to prevent exposure and adverse human health effects and diminished quality of life associated with exposure to hazardous substances from waste sites, unplanned releases, and other sources of pollution present in the environment. Through its programs—including surveillance, registries, health studies, environmental health education, and applied substance-specific research—and by working with other federal, state, and local government agencies, ATSDR acts to protect public health.

WHAT IS A PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT?

An ATSDR Public Health Assessment reviews available information about hazardous substances at a site and evaluates whether exposure to them might cause any harm to people. ATSDR conducts a Public Health Assessment for every site on or proposed for the National Priorities List (the NPL, also known as the Superfund list). A Public Health Assessment is not the same thing as a medical exam or a community health study. It can sometimes lead to those things, as well as to other public health activities.

Public Health Assessments consider—

- ❑ what the levels (or “concentrations”) of hazardous substances are
- ❑ whether people might be exposed to contamination and how (through “exposure pathways” such as breathing air, drinking or contacting water, contacting or eating soil, or eating food)
- ❑ what harm the substances might cause to people (or the contaminants’ “toxicity”)
- ❑ whether working or living nearby might affect people’s health
- ❑ other dangers to people, such as unsafe buildings, abandoned mine shafts, or other physical hazards

To make those determinations, ATSDR looks at three primary sources of information—

- ❑ *environmental data*, such as information about the contaminants and how people could come in contact with them
- ❑ *health data*, including available information on communitywide rates of illness, disease, and death compared with national and state rates
- ❑ *community concerns*, such as reports from the public about how the site affects their health or quality of life

HOW ARE PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENTS USED?

ATSDR's Public Health Assessments identify health studies or other public health actions—such as community environmental health education—that might be needed. They advise federal, state, and local agencies on actions to prevent or reduce people's exposure to hazardous substances.

HOW IS THE COMMUNITY INVOLVED IN A PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT?

The community plays a key role in a Public Health Assessment and any activity that may follow. Throughout the Public Health Assessment, ATSDR talks with people living or working near the site—action groups, local leaders, and health professionals, among other community members—about what they know about the site and their site-related health concerns.

Community health concerns are addressed in every Public Health Assessment for every site.

Two-way communication between the public and ATSDR is vital to every Public Health Assessment. For that reason, ATSDR has many ways to give and receive information and involve the community in its activities, such as—

- Public Availability Sessions where community members can meet individually with ATSDR staff.
- Public Meetings so community members can express ideas in a larger forum.
- Community Assistance Panels, or CAPs, which work to inform ATSDR about community concerns and health information and, in turn, to inform the community about ATSDR activities and the status of the Public Health Assessment.
- Other communication channels, such as contact with local community groups, political leaders, and health professionals, as well as articles in local newspapers and stories on television and radio.
- Before the Public Health Assessment is finished, it is available in the community during the Public Comment Period. The Public Comment Period lets the community tell ATSDR how well the Public Health Assessment addresses their concerns. ATSDR responds to the public's comments in the final Public Health Assessment.

Fact sheets are available on Public Health Advisories, Health Consultations, Community Assistance Panels, and other ATSDR activities. If you want to know more about ATSDR, or if you have health concerns or information to share about ways people might have been or might now be exposed to hazardous substances, please contact the ATSDR Community Involvement Team, visit the ATSDR web site, or call the ATSDR toll-free information line.

Community Involvement Team
ATSDR - Division of Health Assessment and Consultation
1600 Clifton Road, NE (E56)
Atlanta, Georgia 30333

ATSDR web site at <http://atsdr1.atsdr.cdc.gov:8080/>

ATSDR information line (888) 42-ATSDR, that's (888) 422-8737