

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about methyl *tert*-butyl ether (MTBE). 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. This information is important 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:** Methyl *tert*-butyl ether (MTBE) is a flammable liquid which is used as an additive in unleaded gasoline. Drinking or breathing MTBE may cause nausea, nose and throat irritation, and nervous system effects. MTBE has been found in at least 11 of the 1,430 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### What is methyl *tert*-butyl ether?

(Pronounced məth'əl tūr'shē-ēr'ē byōōt'l ē'thər)

Methyl *tert*-butyl ether (MTBE) is a flammable liquid with a distinctive, disagreeable odor. It is made from blending chemicals such as isobutylene and methanol, and has been used since the 1980s as an additive for unleaded gasolines to achieve more efficient burning.

MTBE is also used to dissolve gallstones. Patients treated in this way have MTBE delivered directly to their gall bladders through special tubes that are surgically inserted.

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

- MTBE quickly evaporates from open containers and surface water, so it is commonly found as a vapor in the air.
- Small amounts of MTBE may dissolve in water and get into underground water.
- It remains in underground water for a long time.

- MTBE may stick to particles in water, which will cause it to eventually settle to the bottom sediment.
- MTBE may be broken down quickly in the air by sunlight.
- MTBE does not build up significantly in plants and animals.

### How might I be exposed to MTBE?

- Touching the skin or breathing contaminated air while pumping gasoline.
- Breathing exhaust fumes while driving a car.
- Breathing air near highways or in cities.
- Drinking, swimming, or showering in water that has been contaminated with MTBE.
- Receiving MTBE treatment for gallstones.

### How can MTBE affect my health?

Breathing small amounts of MTBE for short periods may cause nose and throat irritation. Some people exposed to MTBE while pumping gasoline, driving their cars, or working

ToxFAQs Internet address via WWW is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>

in gas stations have reported having headaches, nausea, dizziness, and mental confusion. However, the actual levels of exposure in these cases are unknown. In addition, these symptoms may have been caused by exposure to other chemicals.

There are no data on the effects in people of drinking MTBE. Studies with rats and mice suggest that drinking MTBE may cause gastrointestinal irritation, liver and kidney damage, and nervous system effects.

### How likely is MTBE to cause cancer?

There is no evidence that MTBE causes cancer in humans. One study with rats found that breathing high levels of MTBE for long periods may cause kidney cancer. Another study with mice found that breathing high levels of MTBE for long periods may cause liver cancer.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), and the EPA have not classified MTBE as to its carcinogenicity.

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

MTBE and its breakdown product, butyl alcohol, can be detected in your breath, blood, or urine for up to 1 or 2 days after exposure. These tests aren't available at most doctors' offices, but can be done at special laboratories that have the right equipment. There is no other test specific to determining MTBE exposure.

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

The EPA has issued guidelines recommending that, to protect children, drinking water levels of MTBE not exceed 4 milligrams per liter of water (4 mg/L) for an exposure of 1-10 days, and 3 mg/L for longer-term exposures.

The American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) has recommended an exposure limit of 40 parts of MTBE per million parts of air (40 ppm) for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

### Glossary

Carcinogenicity: Ability to cause cancer.

CAS: Chemical Abstracts Service.

Evaporate: To change into a vapor or gas.

Milligram (mg): One thousandth of a gram.

ppm: Parts per million.

Sediment: Mud and debris that have settled to the bottom of a body of water.

### References

This ToxFAQs information is taken from the 1996 Toxicological Profile for Methyl *tert*-Butyl Ether produced by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service in Atlanta, GA.

**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 via WWW 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.

