

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about chlorodibenzofurans (CDFs). 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.

SUMMARY: Exposure to chlorodibenzofurans (CDFs) occurs mainly by eating certain contaminated foods. In people, exposure to CDFs is most likely to cause skin and eye irritation, and increased vulnerability to respiratory infection and nervous system effects. This chemical has been found in at least 51 of 1,416 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency.

What are chlorodibenzofurans (CDFs)?

(Pronounced klôr'ô dī bĕn'-'zô fyôôr'ôn')

Chlorinated dibenzofurans, or CDFs, are a family of chemicals that contain one to eight chlorine atoms attached to the carbon atoms of the parent chemical, dibenzofuran. There are 135 different types of CDFs with varying harmful health and environmental effects. The compounds that contain chlorine atoms at the 2,3,7,8-positions of the dibenzofuran molecule are known to be especially harmful.

Not all of the different types have been found in large enough quantities to study the physical properties. However, of those that have been studied, they do not dissolve in water easily and appear to be in the form of colorless solids.

There is no known use for these chemicals. Other than for research purposes, they are not deliberately produced by industry. Most CDFs are produced in small amounts as undesirable by-products of certain processes, such as manufacturing other chemicals or bleaching at paper and pulp mills. CDFs can also be released from incinerators.

What happens to CDFs when they enter the environment?

- CDFs exist in the air as solid particles and sometimes vapors.
- They can enter the environment from car exhausts or from burning coal, wood, or oil for home heating, and the production of electricity.
- Vaporized CDFs are broken down by other chemicals in the atmosphere.
- They can be removed from the air in snow and rain.
- They attach to soil and sediment in lakes and rivers.
- They are not likely to move into groundwater from soil.
- They accumulate in fish to tens of thousands times higher levels than in the water or sediment.
- They also build up in other animals, birds, and people that are exposed to CDFs in their food.

How might I be exposed to CDFs?

- Eating contaminated foods, such as meat, fish, and milk (90% of daily exposure, which is only a few picograms [pg], results from eating contaminated food).
- Breathing air or drinking water that is contaminated, or coming in contact with contaminated soil.
- Using products such as milk cartons, coffee filters, and tampons could result in very low exposures.
- Breathing contaminated workplace air.

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

How can CDFs affect my health?

Very little is known about the health effects in people or animals from breathing or touching CDFs. A study in mice showed that skin exposure to low levels over several weeks produced effects similar to those from ingesting CDFs.

Most of the information on the adverse health effects comes from studies in people who were accidentally exposed to food contaminated with CDFs. The amounts that these people were exposed to were much higher than are likely from environmental exposures or from a normal diet.

CDFs caused skin and eye irritations, including severe acne, darkened skin color, and swollen eyelids with discharge from the eyes. CDF poisoning also caused vomiting and diarrhea, anemia, more frequent lung infections, numbness, effects on the nervous system, and mild changes in the liver. Children born to exposed mothers had skin irritation and more difficulty learning.

Many of the same effects that occurred in people also occurred in laboratory animals that ate CDFs. Animals also had severe weight loss, and their stomachs, livers, kidneys, and immune systems were seriously injured. Some animals had birth defects and testicular damage, and in severe cases, some animals died. These effects in animals were seen when they were fed large amounts of CDFs over a short time, or small amounts over several weeks or months.

How likely are CDFs to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have not classified CDFs for carcinogenicity.

It is not definitely known if CDFs cause cancer in people. There are no cancer studies in animals that ate or

breathed CDFs. One study found that when CDFs were applied to the skin of animals, they did not cause cancer, but when they were applied with another compound called MNNG, which is known to initiate tumors, cancer did develop.

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

There are tests available to measure CDFs in your blood, body fat, and breast milk. The tests can tell you if you have been exposed, but they can't tell you the exact amount of CDFs or for how long you were exposed. The tests also cannot predict whether you will experience harmful health effects. Nearly everyone in the United States and other industrialized countries has been exposed to low levels of CDFs because they are in the environment.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

There are no federal guidelines or recommendations for protecting human health or the environment from exposure to CDFs.

Glossary

Anemia: A decreased ability of the blood to transport oxygen.

Carcinogenicity: Ability to cause cancer.

Picogram (pg): One trillionth of a gram.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1994. Toxicological profile for chlorodibenzofurans. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

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.

