

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about phenol. 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. It is important you understand this information 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: Phenol is both a manufactured chemical and a natural substance. Phenol is used as a disinfectant and is found in a number of consumer products. Skin exposure to high amounts can produce skin burns, liver damage, dark urine, irregular heart beat, and even death. Ingestion of concentrated phenol can produce internal burns. Phenol has been found in at least 595 of the 1,678 National Priority List (NPL) sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is phenol?

Phenol is both a manufactured chemical and a natural substance. It is a colorless-to-white solid when pure. The commercial product is a liquid. Phenol has a distinct odor that is sickeningly sweet and tarry.

You can taste and smell phenol at levels lower than those that are associated with harmful effects. Phenol evaporates more slowly than water, and a moderate amount can form a solution with water. Phenol can catch fire.

Phenol is used primarily in the production of phenolic resins and in the manufacture of nylon and other synthetic fibers. It is also used in slimicides (chemicals that kill bacteria and fungi in slimes), as a disinfectant and antiseptic, and in medicinal preparations such as mouthwash and sore throat lozenges.

What happens to phenol when it enters the environment?

- Following small, single releases, phenol is rapidly removed from the air (generally, half is removed in less than a day).
- Phenol generally remains in the soil only about 2 to 5 days.
- Phenol can remain in water for a week or more.
- Larger or repeated releases of phenol can remain in the air, water, and soil for much longer periods of time.

- Small amounts of phenol may be found in organisms that live in contaminated water.
- Phenol does not build up in fish, other animals, or plants.

How might I be exposed to phenol?

- You may be exposed to phenol if you live near landfills or hazardous waste sites that contain phenol or near facilities manufacturing phenol.
- You may be exposed to very low levels in your home because it is found in a number of consumer products, including mouthwashes, gargles, and throat lozenges.
- You may be exposed to phenol if you undergo "chemical peels" to remove skin lesions with phenol-containing products or are treated for chronic pain or spasticity with injections of phenol.
- Low levels of phenol are found in some foods, including smoked summer sausage, fried chicken, mountain cheese, and some species of fish.
- Smoking or inhaling second hand smoke will expose you to phenol.
- Low levels of phenol can be present in air and drinking water.

How can phenol affect my health?

Short-term exposure to phenol in the air can cause respiratory irritation, headaches, and burning eyes. People who had skin exposure to high amounts of phenol had skin burns, liver damage, dark urine, irregular heart beat, and

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some died. Ingestion of high concentrations of phenol has resulted in internal burns and death. The effects of prolonged exposure to low levels of phenol in air or of ingestion of low levels of phenol are uncertain because almost always there has been simultaneous exposure to other chemicals.

In animals, breathing air with high levels of phenol resulted in irritation of the lungs. Repeated exposures induced muscle tremors and loss of coordination. Exposure to high concentrations of phenol in the air for several weeks caused paralysis and severe injury to the heart, liver, kidneys, and lungs, and in some cases, death. Some animals that drank water with very high concentrations of phenol suffered muscle tremors and loss of coordination.

Phenol can have beneficial effects when used medically as an antiseptic or anesthetic.

How likely is phenol to cause cancer?

It is not known if phenol causes cancer in humans. Cancer developed in mice when phenol was applied to the skin several times per week for the lifetime of the animal. Phenol did not cause cancer in mice or rats that drank water containing it for 2 years. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the EPA have determined that phenol is not classifiable as to its carcinogenicity to humans.

How can phenol affect children?

Children are exposed to phenol in the same way adults are, except for exposures of adults at work. However, children are at greater risk of accidentally ingesting or spilling on their skin home products that contain phenol. Vomiting and lethargy were the most frequent signs of toxicity observed in children who accidentally ingested phenol and were treated at a poison control center.

Phenol has caused minor birth defects and low birth weight in animals generally at exposure levels that also were toxic to the pregnant mothers.

How can families reduce the risks of exposure to phenol?

- Avoiding environmental tobacco smoke, which contains phenol, will reduce phenol exposures.
- Always store household products and over-the-counter medications that contain phenol in their original labeled containers out of the reach of children.

Is there a medical test to determine whether I've been exposed to phenol?

There is a urine test that can tell if you have been exposed to phenol recently (within 1 or 2 days). However, the test cannot tell if you were exposed only to phenol because many substances are converted to phenol in the body. The test also cannot tell whether adverse health effects might result from the exposure. The test for phenol is not routinely performed at your doctor's office, but your doctor can take samples and send them to a testing laboratory.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA lifetime health advisory for phenol in water is 2 milligrams per liter (2 mg/L). EPA requires that spills of 1,000 pounds or more of phenol to the environment be reported to the Agency.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set a limit of 5 parts per million (ppm) in air to protect workers during 8-hour work shifts.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends a limit of 5 ppm for phenol in workroom air over a 10-hour workday and that the concentration of phenol should not exceed 16 ppm during a 15-minute period.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2006. Toxicological Profile for Phenol (Draft for Public Comment). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Public 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 and Environmental Medicine, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-800-232-4636, 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.

