

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about benzene. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-800-232-4636. 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:** Benzene is a widely used chemical formed from both natural processes and human activities. Breathing benzene can cause drowsiness, dizziness, and unconsciousness; long-term benzene exposure causes effects on the bone marrow and can cause anemia and leukemia. Benzene has been found in at least 1,000 of the 1,684 National Priority List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

## What is benzene?

Benzene is a colorless liquid with a sweet odor. It evaporates into the air very quickly and dissolves slightly in water. It is highly flammable and is formed from both natural processes and human activities.

Benzene is widely used in the United States; it ranks in the top 20 chemicals for production volume. Some industries use benzene to make other chemicals which are used to make plastics, resins, and nylon and other synthetic fibers. Benzene is also used to make some types of rubbers, lubricants, dyes, detergents, drugs, and pesticides. Natural sources of benzene include emissions from volcanoes and forest fires. Benzene is also a natural part of crude oil, gasoline, and cigarette smoke.

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

- Industrial processes are the main source of benzene in the environment.
- Benzene can pass into the air from water and soil.
- It reacts with other chemicals in the air and breaks down within a few days.
- Benzene in the air can attach to rain or snow and be carried back down to the ground.

- It breaks down more slowly in water and soil, and can pass through the soil into underground water.
- Benzene does not build up in plants or animals.

## How might I be exposed to benzene?

- Outdoor air contains low levels of benzene from tobacco smoke, automobile service stations, exhaust from motor vehicles, and industrial emissions.
- Vapors (or gases) from products that contain benzene, such as glues, paints, furniture wax, and detergents, can also be a source of exposure.
- Air around hazardous waste sites or gas stations will contain higher levels of benzene.
- Working in industries that make or use benzene.

## How can benzene affect my health?

Breathing very high levels of benzene can result in death, while high levels can cause drowsiness, dizziness, rapid heart rate, headaches, tremors, confusion, and unconsciousness. Eating or drinking foods containing high levels of benzene can cause vomiting, irritation of the stomach, dizziness, sleepiness, convulsions, rapid heart rate, and death.

The major effect of benzene from long-term exposure is on the blood. Benzene causes harmful effects on the bone

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marrow and can cause a decrease in red blood cells leading to anemia. It can also cause excessive bleeding and can affect the immune system, increasing the chance for infection.

Some women who breathed high levels of benzene for many months had irregular menstrual periods and a decrease in the size of their ovaries, but we do not know for certain that benzene caused the effects. It is not known whether benzene will affect fertility in men.

### **How likely is benzene to cause cancer?**

Long-term exposure to high levels of benzene in the air can cause leukemia, particularly acute myelogenous leukemia, often referred to as AML. This is a cancer of the blood-forming organs. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that benzene is a known carcinogen. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the EPA have determined that benzene is carcinogenic to humans.

### **How can benzene affect children?**

Children can be affected by benzene exposure in the same ways as adults. It is not known if children are more susceptible to benzene poisoning than adults.

Benzene can pass from the mother's blood to a fetus. Animal studies have shown low birth weights, delayed bone formation, and bone marrow damage when pregnant animals breathed benzene.

### **How can families reduce the risks of exposure to benzene?**

Benzene exposure can be reduced by limiting contact with gasoline and cigarette smoke. Families are encouraged not to

smoke in their house, in enclosed environments, or near their children.

### **Is there a medical test to determine whether I've been exposed to benzene?**

Several tests can show if you have been exposed to benzene. There is a test for measuring benzene in the breath; this test must be done shortly after exposure. Benzene can also be measured in the blood; however, since benzene disappears rapidly from the blood, this test is only useful for recent exposures.

In the body, benzene is converted to products called metabolites. Certain metabolites can be measured in the urine. The metabolite S-phenylmercapturic acid in urine is a sensitive indicator of benzene exposure. However, this test must be done shortly after exposure and is not a reliable indicator of how much benzene you have been exposed to, since the metabolites may be present in urine from other sources.

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

The EPA has set the maximum permissible level of benzene in drinking water at 5 parts benzene per billion parts of water (5 ppb).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set limits of 1 part benzene per million parts of workplace air (1 ppm) for 8 hour shifts and 40 hour work weeks.

### **References**

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2007. Toxicological Profile for Benzene (Update). 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.

