

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about barium and barium compounds. 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 these substances 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: Exposure to barium occurs mostly in the workplace or from drinking contaminated water. Ingesting drinking water containing levels of barium above the EPA drinking water guidelines for relatively short periods of time can cause gastrointestinal disturbances and muscle weakness. Ingesting high levels for a long time can damage the kidneys. Barium and barium compounds have been found in at least 798 of the 1,684 National Priority List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is barium?

Barium is a silvery-white metal which exists in nature only in ores containing mixtures of elements. It combines with other chemicals such as sulfur or carbon and oxygen to form barium compounds.

Barium compounds are used by the oil and gas industries to make drilling muds. Drilling muds make it easier to drill through rock by keeping the drill bit lubricated. They are also used to make paint, bricks, ceramics, glass, and rubber.

Barium sulfate is sometimes used by doctors to perform medical tests and to take x-rays of the gastrointestinal tract.

What happens to barium when it enters the environment?

- Barium gets into the air during the mining, refining, and production of barium compounds, and from the burning of coal and oil.
- The length of time that barium will last in air, land, water, or sediments depends on the form of barium released.
- Barium compounds, such as barium sulfate and barium carbonate, which do not dissolve well in water, can last a long time in the environment.

Barium compounds, such as barium chloride, barium nitrate, or barium hydroxide, that dissolve easily in water usually do not last in these forms for a long time in the environment. The barium in these compounds that is dissolved in water quickly combines with sulfate or carbonate that are naturally found in water and become the longer lasting forms (barium sulfate and barium carbonate).

Fish and aquatic organisms can accumulate barium.

How might I be exposed to barium?

- Ingesting small amounts present in your food and water or breathing air containing very low levels of barium.
- Living in areas with unusually high natural levels of barium in the drinking water.
- Working in a job that involves barium production or use.
- Living or working near waste sites where barium has been disposed of.

How can barium affect my health?

The health effects of the different barium compounds depend on how well the compound dissolves in water or in the stomach contents. Barium compounds that do not dissolve well, such as barium sulfate, are not generally harmful.

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Barium has been found to potentially cause gastrointestinal disturbances and muscular weakness when people are exposed to it at levels above the EPA drinking water standards for relatively short periods of time. Some people who eat or drink amounts of barium above background levels found in food and water for a short period may experience vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, difficulties in breathing, increased or decreased blood pressure, numbness around the face, and muscle weakness. Eating or drinking very large amounts of barium compounds that easily dissolve can cause changes in heart rhythm or paralysis and possibly death. Animals that drank barium over long periods had damage to the kidneys, decreases in body weight, and some died.

How likely is barium to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) have not classified barium as to its carcinogenicity. The EPA has determined that barium is not likely to be carcinogenic to humans following ingestion and that there is insufficient information to determine whether it will be carcinogenic to humans following inhalation exposure.

How can barium affect children?

We do not know whether children will be more or less sensitive than adults to barium toxicity. A study in rats that swallowed barium found a decrease in newborn body weight; we do not know if a similar effect would be seen in humans.

How can families reduce the risks of exposure to barium?

The greatest potential source of barium exposure is through food and drinking water. However, the amount of barium in foods and drinking water are typically too low to be of concern.

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

There is no routine medical test to determine whether you have been exposed to barium. Doctors can measure barium in body tissues and fluids, such as bones, blood, urine, and feces, using very complex instruments. These tests cannot be used to predict the extent of the exposure or potential health effects.

The geometric mean barium level measured in the U.S. general population aged 6 and older is reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as 1.44 µg/g creatinine (measured in urine).

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA has set a limit of 2.0 milligrams of barium per liter of drinking water (2.0 mg/L), which is the same as 2 ppm.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set Permissible Exposure Limits (PELs) of 0.5 milligrams of soluble barium compounds per cubic meter of workplace air (0.5 mg/m³) for 8 hour shifts and 40 hour work weeks. The OSHA limits for barium sulfate dust are 15 mg/m³ of total dust and 5 mg/m³ for respirable fraction.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has set Recommended Exposure Limits (RELs) of 0.5 mg/m³ for soluble barium compounds. The NIOSH has set RELs of 10 mg/m³ (total dust) for barium sulfate and 5 mg/m³ (respirable fraction).

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2007. Toxicological Profile for Barium and Compounds (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.

