

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about fuel oils. 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's 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.

**SUMMARY: Fuel oils are liquid mixtures produced from petroleum, and their use mostly involves burning them as fuels. Drinking or breathing fuel oils may cause nausea or nervous system effects. However, exposure under normal use conditions is not likely to be harmful. Fuel oils have been found in at least 26 of the 1,430 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).**

## What are fuel oils?

(Pronounced fyoo'el oilz)

Fuel oils are a variety of yellowish to light brown liquid mixtures that come from crude petroleum. Some chemicals found in fuel oils may evaporate easily, while others may more easily dissolve in water.

Fuel oils are produced by different petroleum refining processes, depending on their intended uses. Fuel oils may be used as fuel for engines, lamps, heaters, furnaces, and stoves, or as solvents.

Some commonly found fuel oils include kerosene, diesel fuel, jet fuel, range oil, and home heating oil. These fuel oils differ from one another by their hydrocarbon compositions, boiling point ranges, chemical additives, and uses.

## What happens to fuel oils when they enter the environment?

- Some chemicals found in fuel oils may evaporate into the air from open containers or contaminated soil or water.
- Some chemicals found in fuel oils may dissolve in water after spills to surface waters or leaks from underground storage tanks.

- Some chemicals found in fuel oils may stick to particles in water, which will eventually cause them to settle to the bottom sediment.
- Some of the chemicals found in fuel oils may be broken down slowly in air, water, and soil by sunlight or small organisms.
- Some of the chemicals found in fuel oils may build up significantly in plants and animals.

## How might I be exposed to fuel oils?

- Using a home kerosene heater or stove, or using fuel oils at work.
- Breathing air in home or building basements that has been contaminated with fuel oil vapors entering from the soil.
- Drinking or swimming in water that has been contaminated with fuel oils from a spill or a leaking underground storage tank.
- Touching soil contaminated with fuel oils.
- Using fuel oils to wash paint or grease from skin or equipment.

## How can fuel oils affect my health?

Little information is available about the health effects that may be caused by fuel oils. People who use kerosene

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

stoves for cooking do not seem to have any health problems related to their exposure.

Breathing some fuel oils for short periods may cause nausea, eye irritation, increased blood pressure, headache, lightheadedness, loss of appetite, poor coordination, and difficulty concentrating. Breathing diesel fuel vapors for long periods may cause kidney damage and lower your blood's ability to clot.

Drinking small amounts of kerosene may cause vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, stomach swelling and cramps, drowsiness, restlessness, painful breathing, irritability, and unconsciousness. Drinking large amounts of kerosene may cause convulsions, coma, or death. Skin contact with kerosene for short periods may cause itchy, red, sore, or peeling skin.

### How likely are fuel oils to cause cancer?

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that some fuel oils (heavy) may possibly cause cancer in humans, but for other fuel oils (light) there is not enough information to make a determination. IARC has also determined that occupational exposures to fuel oils during petroleum refining are probably carcinogenic in humans.

Some studies with mice have suggested that repeated contact with fuel oils may cause liver or skin cancer. However, other mouse studies have found this not to be the case. No studies are available in other animals or in people on the carcinogenic effects of fuel oils.

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

There is no medical test that shows if you have been exposed to fuel oils. Tests are available to determine if some of

the chemicals commonly found in fuel oils are in your blood. However, the presence of these chemicals in blood may not necessarily mean that you have been exposed to fuel oils.

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

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Air Force Office of Safety and Health (AFOSH) have set a permissible exposure level (PEL) of 400 parts of petroleum distillates per million parts of air (400 ppm) for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends that average workplace air levels not exceed 350 milligrams of petroleum distillates per cubic meter of air (350 mg/m<sup>3</sup>) for a 40-hour workweek.

The Department of Transportation (DOT) lists fuel oils as hazardous materials and, therefore, regulates their transportation.

### Glossary

Carcinogenic: Able to cause cancer.

CAS: Chemical Abstracts Service.

Evaporate: To change into a vapor or a gas.

Hydrocarbon: Any compound made up of hydrogen and carbon.

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

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1995. Toxicological profile for fuel oils. 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.

