

Phosgene Patient Information Sheet

This handout provides information and follow-up instructions for persons who have been exposed to phosgene.

What is phosgene?

At room temperature, phosgene is a colorless gas. At high concentrations, it has a suffocating odor; at low concentrations, it smells like green corn or new mown hay. It is not flammable. Phosgene is used in the manufacture of many chemicals. It is also produced when chlorine-containing chemicals burn or break down.

What immediate health effects can result from exposure to phosgene?

Most exposures to phosgene occur from breathing the gas. Exposure to small amounts usually causes eye, nose, and throat irritation. However, the irritating effects can be so mild at first that the person does not leave the area of exposure. Generally, the higher the exposure, the more severe the symptoms. Extended exposure can cause severe breathing difficulty, which may lead to chemical pneumonia and death. Severe breathing problems may not develop for as long as 48 hours after exposure.

Can phosgene poisoning be treated?

There is no antidote for phosgene, but its effects can be treated, and most exposed persons get well. Persons who have experienced serious symptoms may need to be hospitalized.

Are any future health effects likely to occur?

A single small exposure from which a person recovers quickly is not likely to cause delayed or long-term effects. After a serious exposure, some symptoms may take a few days to develop. Some persons who have had serious exposures have developed permanent breathing difficulty and tend to develop lung infections easily.

What tests can be done if a person has been exposed to phosgene?

Specific tests for the presence of phosgene in blood or urine generally are not useful to the doctor. If a severe exposure has occurred, chest x-rays, blood and urine analyses and other tests may show whether the lungs or other organs have been injured. Because effects may take several days to develop, immediate and follow-up testing of lung function should be done in all cases of suspected exposure to phosgene.

Where can more information about phosgene be found?

More information about phosgene can be obtained from your regional poison control center; your state, county, or local health department; the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR); your doctor; or a clinic in your area that specializes in occupational and environmental health. If the exposure happened at work, you may wish to discuss it with your employer, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), or the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Ask the person who gave you this form for help in locating these telephone numbers.

Follow-up Instructions

Keep this page and take it with you to your next appointment. Follow *only* the instructions checked below.

Call your doctor or the Emergency Department if you develop any unusual signs or symptoms within the next 24 hours, especially:

- coughing or wheezing
- difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- increased pain or a discharge from exposed skin or eyes
- chest pain or tightness

No follow-up appointment is necessary unless you develop any of the symptoms listed above.

Call for an appointment with Dr. _____ in the practice of _____.

When you call for your appointment, please say that you were treated in the Emergency Department at _____ Hospital by _____ and were advised to be seen again in _____ days.

Return to the Emergency Department/ _____ Clinic on (date) _____ at _____ AM/PM for a follow-up examination.

Do not perform vigorous physical activities for 1 to 2 days.

You may resume everyday activities including driving and operating machinery.

Do not return to work for _____ days.

You may return to work on a limited basis. See instructions below.

Avoid exposure to cigarette smoke for 72 hours; smoke may worsen the condition of your lungs.

Avoid drinking alcoholic beverages for at least 24 hours; alcohol may worsen injury to your stomach or have other effects.

Avoid taking the following medications: _____

You may continue taking the following medication(s) that your doctor(s) prescribed for you: _____

Other instructions: _____

• Provide the Emergency Department with the name and the number of your primary care physician so that the ED can send him or her a record of your emergency department visit.

• You or your physician can get more information on the chemical by contacting: _____
_____ or _____, or by checking out the following Internet
Web sites: _____; _____.

Signature of patient _____ Date _____

Signature of physician _____ Date _____