

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about ethylbenzene. 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: Ethylbenzene is a colorless liquid found in a number of products including gasoline and paints. Breathing very high levels can cause dizziness and throat and eye irritation. Breathing lower levels has resulted in hearing effects and kidney damage in animals. Ethylbenzene has been found in at least 829 of 1,689 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is ethylbenzene?

Ethylbenzene is a colorless, flammable liquid that smells like gasoline.

It is naturally found in coal tar and petroleum and is also found in manufactured products such as inks, pesticides, and paints.

Ethylbenzene is used primarily to make another chemical, styrene. Other uses include as a solvent, in fuels, and to make other chemicals.

What happens to ethylbenzene when it enters the environment?

- Ethylbenzene moves easily into the air from water and soil.
- It takes about 3 days for ethylbenzene to be broken down in air into other chemicals.
- In surface water, ethylbenzene breaks down by reacting with other chemicals found naturally in water.
- Ethylbenzene can move through soil into groundwater
- In soil, it is broken down by bacteria.

How might I be exposed to ethylbenzene?

- If you live in a city or near many factories or heavily traveled highways, you may be exposed to ethylbenzene in air.
- Releases of ethylbenzene into the air occur from burning oil, gas, and coal and from industries using ethylbenzene.

- Ethylbenzene is not often found in drinking water. Higher levels may be found in residential drinking water wells near landfills, waste sites, or leaking underground fuel storage tanks.
- Working in an industry where ethylbenzene is used or made.
- Using products containing it, such as gasoline, carpet glues, varnishes, and paints.

How can ethylbenzene affect my health?

Exposure to high levels of ethylbenzene in air for short periods can cause eye and throat irritation. Exposure to higher levels can result in dizziness.

Irreversible damage to the inner ear and hearing has been observed in animals exposed to relatively low concentrations of ethylbenzene for several days to weeks.

Exposure to relatively low concentrations of ethylbenzene in air for several months to years causes kidney damage in animals.

How likely is ethylbenzene to cause cancer?

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that ethylbenzene is a possible human carcinogen.

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

How can ethylbenzene affect children?

There are no studies evaluating the effects of ethylbenzene exposure on children or immature animals. It is likely that children would have the same health effects as adults. We do not know whether children would be more sensitive than adults to the effects of ethylbenzene.

We do not know if ethylbenzene will cause birth defects in humans. Minor birth defects and low birth weight have occurred in newborn animals whose mothers were exposed to ethylbenzene in air during pregnancy.

How can families reduce the risks of exposure to ethylbenzene?

- Use adequate ventilation to reduce exposure to ethylbenzene vapors from consumer products such as gasoline, pesticides, varnishes and paints, and newly installed carpeting.
- Sometimes older children sniff household chemicals, including ethylbenzene, in an attempt to get high. Talk with your children about the dangers of sniffing chemicals.
- Household chemicals should be stored out of reach of children to prevent accidental poisoning. Always store household chemicals in their original containers; never store them in containers that children would find attractive to eat or drink from, such as old soda bottles. Gasoline should be stored in a gasoline can with a locked cap.

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

Ethylbenzene is found in the blood, urine, breath, and some body tissues of exposed people. The most common way to test for ethylbenzene is in the urine. This test measures substances formed by the breakdown of ethylbenzene. Because these substances leave the body very quickly, this test needs to be done within a few hours after exposure occurs.

These tests can show you were exposed to ethylbenzene, but cannot predict the kind of health effects that might occur.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA has determined that exposure to ethylbenzene in drinking water at concentrations of 30 ppm for 1 day or 3 ppm for 10 days is not expected to cause any adverse effects in a child.

The EPA has determined that lifetime exposure to 0.7 ppm ethylbenzene is not expected to cause any adverse effects.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) has limited workers' exposure to an average of 100 ppm for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

References

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

