

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about methylene chloride. 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.

HIGHLIGHTS: Exposure to methylene chloride occurs mostly from breathing contaminated air, but may also occur through skin contact or by drinking contaminated water. Breathing in large amounts of methylene chloride can damage the central nervous system. Contact of eyes or skin with methylene chloride can result in burns. Methylene chloride has been found in at least 882 of 1,569 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is methylene chloride?

Methylene chloride is a colorless liquid with a mild, sweet odor. Another name for it is dichloromethane. Methylene chloride does not occur naturally in the environment.

Methylene chloride is used as an industrial solvent and as a paint stripper. It may also be found in some aerosol and pesticide products and is used in the manufacture of photographic film.

What happens to methylene chloride when it enters the environment?

- Methylene chloride is mainly released to the environment in air. About half of the methylene chloride in air disappears in 53 to 127 days.
- Methylene chloride does not easily dissolve in water, but small amounts may be found in drinking water.
- We do not expect methylene chloride to build up in plants or animals.

How might I be exposed to methylene chloride?

- The most likely way to be exposed to methylene chloride is by breathing contaminated air.
- Breathing the vapors given off by products containing methylene chloride. Exposure to high levels of methylene chloride is likely if methylene chloride or a product containing it is used in a room with inadequate ventilation.

How can methylene chloride affect my health?

If you breathe in large amounts of methylene chloride you may feel unsteady, dizzy, and have nausea and a tingling or numbness of your finger and toes. A person breathing smaller amounts of methylene chloride may become less attentive and less accurate in tasks requiring hand-eye coordination. Skin contact with methylene chloride causes burning and redness of the skin.

How likely is methylene chloride to cause cancer?

We do not know if methylene chloride can cause cancer in humans. An increased cancer risk was seen in mice

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

breathing large amounts of methylene chloride for a long time.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has determined that methylene chloride may cause cancer in humans.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that methylene chloride can be reasonably anticipated to be a cancer-causing chemical.

The EPA has determined that methylene chloride is a probable cancer-causing agent in humans.

How can methylene chloride affect children?

It is likely that health effects seen in children exposed to high amounts of methylene chloride will be similar to the effects seen in adults. We do not know if methylene chloride can affect the ability of people to have children or if it causes birth defects. Some birth defects have been seen in animals inhaling very high levels of methylene chloride.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to methylene chloride?

- Families may be exposed to methylene chloride while using products such as paint removers. Such products should always be used in well-ventilated areas and skin contact should be avoided.
- Children should not be allowed to remain near indoor paint removal activities.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to methylene chloride?

- Several tests can measure exposure to methylene chloride.

These tests are not routinely available in your doctor's office.

- Methylene chloride can be detected in the air you breathe out and in your blood. These tests are only useful for detecting exposures that have occurred within a few days.
- It is also possible to measure carboxyhemoglobin (a chemical formed in the blood as methylene chloride breaks down in the body) in the blood or formic acid (a breakdown product of methylene chloride) in the urine. These tests are not specific for methylene chloride.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

- The EPA requires that releases of methylene chloride of 1,000 pounds or more be reported to the federal government.
- The EPA recommends that exposure of children to methylene chloride be limited to less than 10 milligrams per liter of drinking water (10 mg/L) for 1 day or 2 mg/L for 10 days.
- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has established limits on the amounts of methylene chloride that can remain after processing of spices, hops extract, and decaffeinated coffee.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set limits of 25 parts methylene chloride per million parts of workplace air (25 ppm) for 8-hour shifts and 40-hour work weeks.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2000. Toxicological Profile for methylene chloride. 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 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.

