

# Health Effects of Chemical Exposure

## You come into contact with chemicals every day.

This is called chemical exposure. Although some chemical exposures are safe, others are not. To make you sick, a certain amount of a harmful chemical must enter your body. Harmful chemicals can get into your body if you breathe, eat, or drink them or if they are absorbed through your skin. This booklet explains some links between chemicals and other harmful substances and their possible health effects.

People respond to chemical exposures in different ways. Some people may come into contact with a chemical and never be harmed. Others may be more sensitive and get sick. Sometimes, illness happens only if you are exposed to a harmful substance for a long time.

Many factors play a part in whether you get sick from contact with chemicals, including

- the kind of chemical you are exposed to,
- how much of the chemical you were in contact with,
- how long the contact lasted,
- how often you were exposed,
- how it entered your body, and
- your health.



## Health Effects of Some Chemicals On Your Body Systems

**The RESPIRATORY SYSTEM's** function is to supply oxygen to the body and remove carbon dioxide. It includes the nasal passages, pharynx, trachea, bronchi, and lungs. Possible health effects of the respiratory system include asbestosis, lung cancer, chronic bronchitis, fibrosis, emphysema, and decreased oxygen supply in blood.

**Some possible contaminants include:**

Asbestos  
Radon  
Cadmium  
Benzene  
Carbon monoxide  
Soot

**Where do you find these?**

Old insulation  
Natural Occurrence  
Old Batteries  
Degreasers  
Car exhaust, unvented or faulty furnaces  
Furnaces, wood burning stoves

**The RENAL SYSTEM's** function is to rid the body of waste, to regulate the amount of body fluids, and to regulate the amount of salts in the body. It includes the kidneys, the urethra, the bladder, and the ureter. Possible health effects of the renal system include decreased formation of urine, prevented urine flow, decreased blood flow to kidney, kidney tissue damage, decreased ability to filter the blood, and kidney cancer.

**Some possible contaminants include:**

Cadmium  
Lead  
Mercury  
Uranium  
Chlorinated hydrocarbon solvents  
(TCE, PCE, PCT)

**Where do you find these?**

Old batteries, cigarette smoke  
Old Paint, outdated plumbing  
Thermostats, thermometers, some fish  
Food & water, proximity to nuclear testing sites  
Degreasers, paint removers, dry cleaning solutions

**The CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM's** function is to move nutrients, gases, and wastes to and from the body, to help stabilize body temperature, and to fight diseases and infections by transporting white blood cells to important areas. It includes the heart, blood, arteries, veins, and capillaries. Possible health effects include heart failure and the inability of blood to carry the necessary oxygen to the body.

**Some possible contaminants include:**

Carbon monoxide  
Carbon disulfide  
Nitrates  
Methylene chloride

**Where do you find these?**

Car exhaust, unvented or faulty furnaces  
Industrial production  
Fertilizers  
Auto part cleaners, paint removers

**The REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM's** function is to produce egg and sperm cells, to nurture a developing fetus, and to produce hormones. For males it includes the testicles, seminal vesicles, prostate gland and the penis. For females it includes the uterus, bladder, vagina, fallopian tubes, ovaries, and the cervix. Possible health effects of the reproductive system include decreased ability to have a baby, increased baby deaths, increased birth defects, and infertility (the inability to have children).

**Some possible contaminants include:**

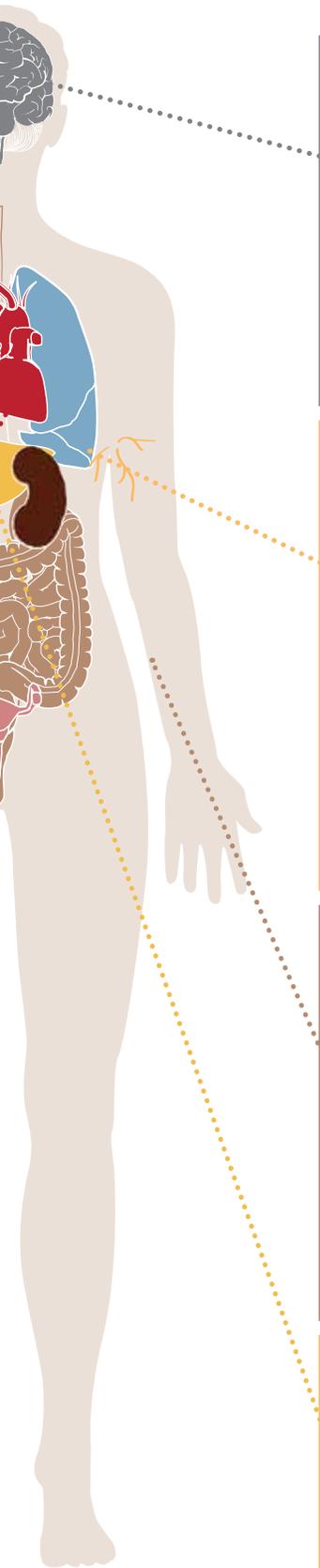
Methyl mercury  
Carbon monoxide  
Lead

**Where do you find these?**

Some fish, coal-burning power  
Car exhaust, unvented or faulty furnaces  
Old Paint, outdated plumbing

Sources: National Institutes of Health Household Products Database, <http://hpd.nlm.nih.gov/index.htm>; Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)'s ToxFaq's, <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>.

## Health Effects of Some Chemicals On Your Body Systems



**The NERVOUS SYSTEM's** function is to transmit messages from one part of the body to another. It includes the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) and the peripheral nervous system. Possible health effects of the nervous system include the inability to move, loss of feeling, confusion, and decreased speech, sight, memory, muscle strength, or coordination.

**Some possible contaminants include:**

Arsenic  
Cadmium  
Carbon monoxide  
Cyanide

**Where do you find these?**

Pressure treated wood, natural occurrence  
Discarded batteries  
Car exhaust, unvented or faulty furnaces  
Rat poison

**The IMMUNE SYSTEM's** function is to protect the body from tumor cells, environmental substances, and invading viruses or bacteria. It includes the lymph system, bone marrow, white blood cells, and the spleen. Possible health effects of the immune system include over-reaction to environmental substances (allergy), immune system slow down or failure, and autoimmunity (autoimmunity causes the body to attack itself – which makes it more likely to have an over-reaction or infection).

**Some possible contaminants include:**

Mercury  
Lead  
Pesticides  
Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)  
Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)

**Where do you find these?**

Thermostats, thermometers, some fish  
Old Paint, outdated plumbing  
Unwashed fruits & vegetables  
Industrial waste, fish from contaminated water  
Cigarette smoke, vehicle exhaust, asphalt roads

**The SKIN** serves as a barrier to germs and other substances, prevents dehydration, and regulates body temperature. Possible health effects of the skin include irritation, rash, redness or discoloration, dermatitis, and health effect related to other systems and organs due to contamination through the skin.

**Some possible contaminants include:**

Nickel  
Mercury  
Arsenic  
Chromium  
Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)  
VOC (volatile organic compounds)

**Where do you find these?**

Cement  
Thermostats, thermometers, some fish  
Pressure treated wood, natural occurrence  
Paints, industrial production  
Industrial waste, fish from contaminated water  
Fumes from gasoline, paint, adhesives, building supplies

**The HEPATIC SYSTEM's** function is to break down food and store nutrients, to make proteins which are essential for blood to clot, and to purify the body of drugs, contaminants, or chemicals. It includes the liver and its veins. Possible health effects of the hepatic system include liver damage, tumors, accumulation of fat (steatosis), and death of liver cells.

**Some possible contaminants include:**

Carbon tetrachloride  
Methylene chloride  
Vinyl chloride

**Where do you find these?**

Adhesives  
Auto part cleaners, paint removers  
Pipe sealer

# Health Effects of Chemical Exposure



*Wash fruits and vegetables*

*Keep home ventilated*



*You come into contact with chemicals every day, but that does not necessarily mean that you will get sick. The human body has a good defense system. It usually tries to get rid of harmful substances.*

Some diseases get worse when you come into contact with a harmful substance, and some diseases are caused by exposure to chemicals. A few examples of diseases caused by an exposure include smog and asthma, asbestos and mesothelioma, and lead and learning disabilities.

**Remember: Taking care of yourself is essential.**

You can reduce your contact with harmful chemicals by

- being aware of chemicals in everyday products;
- being aware of any contamination, pollution, or hot spots (areas known to have harmful amounts of contamination) around your home or work;
- washing your hands;
- washing fruits and vegetables;
- reading labels that warn you about chemical exposure;
- not burning treated wood;
- keeping your home ventilated;
- following proper disposal guidelines for electronics, batteries, paint, and other harmful chemical containing products;
- limiting intake of fish high in mercury and following local fish advisories; remember that consuming fish low in mercury is part of a healthy diet; and
- avoiding cigarette smoke.

For more information about the health effects of chemical exposure or other environmental health topics, please call the ATSDR Information Center, toll-free, at 1-800-232-4636; or visit our Web site at <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov>.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), based in Atlanta, Georgia, is a federal public health agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ATSDR partners with communities across the nation to increase knowledge about toxic substances, reduce the health effects of toxic exposures, and protect the public health.