

Phenols

Highlights

Phenol is both a manufactured chemical and a natural substance. Phenol is used as a disinfectant and is found in a number of consumer products. Skin exposure to high amounts can produce skin burns, liver damage, dark urine, irregular heart beat, and even death. Ingestion of concentrated phenol can produce internal burns. Phenol has been found in at least 595 of the 1,678 National Priority List (NPL) sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is phenol?

Phenol is both a manufactured chemical and a natural substance. It is a colorless-to-white solid when pure. The commercial product is a liquid. Phenol has a distinct odor that is sickeningly sweet and tarry.

You can taste and smell phenol at levels lower than those that are associated with harmful effects. Phenol evaporates more slowly than water, and a moderate amount can form a solution with water.

Phenol is used primarily in the production of phenolic resins and in the manufacture of nylon and other synthetic fibers. It is also used in slimicides (chemicals that kill bacteria and fungi in slimes), as a disinfectant and antiseptic, and in medicinal preparations such

What happens to phenol when it enters the environment?

- Following small, single releases, phenol is rapidly removed from the air (generally, half is removed in less than a day).
- Phenol generally remains in the soil only about 2 to 5 days.
- Phenol can remain in water for a week or more.
- Larger or repeated releases of phenol can remain in the air, water, and soil for much longer periods of time.
- Phenol does not build up in fish, other animals, or plants.

How might I be exposed to phenol?

- You may be exposed to phenol if you live near landfills or hazardous waste sites that contain phenol or near facilities manufacturing phenol.
- You may be exposed to very low levels in your home because it is found in a number of consumer products, including mouthwashes and throat lozenges.
- You may be exposed to phenol if you undergo “chemical peels” to remove skin lesions with phenol-containing products or are treated for chronic pain or spasticity with injections of phenol.

- Low levels of phenol are found in some foods, including smoked summer sausage, fried chicken, mountain cheese, and some species of fish.
- Smoking or inhaling second hand smoke will expose you to phenol.
- Low levels of phenol can be present in air and drinking water.

How can phenol affect my health?

Most of the phenol that you may inhale or ingest will enter the bloodstream; less will enter if there is contact with the skin.

Short-term exposure to phenol in the air can cause respiratory irritation, headaches, and burning eyes. People who had skin exposure to high amounts of phenol had skin burns, liver damage, dark urine, irregular heart beat, and some died. Ingestion of high concentrations of phenol has resulted in internal burns and death.

In animals, breathing air with high levels of phenol resulted in irritation of the lungs. Repeated exposures induced muscle tremors and loss of coordination. Exposure to high concentrations of phenol in the air for several weeks caused paralysis and severe injury to the heart, liver, kidneys, and lungs, and in some cases, death. Some animals that drank water with very high concentrations of phenol suffered muscle tremors and loss of coordination.

Phenol can have beneficial effects when used medically as an antiseptic or anesthetic.

How likely is phenol to cause cancer?

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the EPA have determined that phenol is not classifiable as to its carcinogenicity to humans.

How can phenol affect children?

Vomiting and lethargy were the most frequent signs of toxicity observed in children who accidentally ingested phenol and were treated at a poison control center. We do not know whether children would be more sensitive than adults to the effects of phenol.

Phenol has caused minor birth defects and low birth weight in animals generally at exposure levels that also were toxic to the pregnant mothers.

How can families reduce the risks of exposure to phenol?

- Avoiding environmental tobacco smoke, which contains phenol, will reduce phenol exposures.
- Always store household products and over-the-counter medications that contain phenol in their original labeled containers out of the reach of children.

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

Phenol can be measured in blood and urine. A higher-than-normal concentration of phenol in the urine may suggest recent exposure to phenol or to substances that are converted to phenol in the body.

The detection of phenol and/or its metabolites in your urine cannot be used to predict the kind of health effects that might develop from that exposure.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA has determined that exposure to phenol in drinking water at concentrations of 6 mg/L for up to 10 days is not expected to cause any adverse effects in a child.

The EPA has determined that lifetime exposure to 2 mg/L phenol in drinking water is not expected to cause any adverse effects.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set a limit of 5 parts per million (ppm) of phenol in air to protect workers during 8-hour work shifts.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2008. [Toxicological Profile for Phenol](#). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

Where can I get more information?

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.

For more information, contact:

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 / TTY: 888-232-6348
FAX: 770-488-4178
Email: cdcinfo@cdc.gov