

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about copper. 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 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:** Copper is a reddish metal that occurs naturally in the environment. It also occurs naturally in plants and animals. Low levels of copper are essential for maintaining good health. High levels can cause harmful effects such as irritation of the nose, mouth and eyes, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, and nausea. Copper has been found in at least 884 of the 1,613 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### What is copper?

Copper is a reddish metal that occurs naturally in rocks, soil, water, and air. Copper also occurs naturally in plants and animals.

Metallic copper can be easily molded or shaped. Metallic copper can be found in the U.S. penny, electrical wiring, and some water pipes. Metallic copper is also found in mixtures (called alloys) with other metals such as brass and bronze. Copper is also found as part of other compounds forming salts. Copper salts occur naturally, but are also manufactured. The most common copper salt is copper sulfate. Most copper compounds are blue-green in color. Copper compounds are commonly used in agriculture to treat plant diseases like mildew, for water treatment and, as preservatives for wood, leather, and fabrics.

### What happens to copper when it enters the environment?

- Copper can enter the environment from the mining of copper and other metals and from factories that make or use metallic copper or copper compounds.
- It can also enter the environment through domestic waste water, combustion of fossil fuels and wastes, wood production, phosphate fertilizer production, and natural sources (e.g., windblown dust from soils, volcanoes, decaying vegetation, forest fires, and sea spray).
- Copper in soil strongly attaches to organic material and minerals.

- Copper that dissolves in water becomes rapidly bound to particles suspended in the water.
- Copper does not typically enter groundwater.
- Copper carried by particles emitted from smelters and ore processing plants is carried back to the ground by gravity or in rain or snow.
- Copper does not break down in the environment.

### How might I be exposed to copper?

- Breathing air, drinking water, eating food, and by skin contact with soil, water, or other copper-containing substances.
- Some copper in the environment can be taken up by plants and animals.
- Higher exposure may occur if your water is corrosive and you have copper plumbing and brass water fixtures.  You may be exposed to higher amounts of copper if you drink water or swim in lakes or reservoirs recently treated with copper to control algae or receive cooling water from a power plant that may have high amounts of dissolved copper.
- Using some garden products (e.g., fungicides) to control plant diseases.
- Living near bronze and brass production facilities may expose you to higher copper levels in soil.
- You may breathe copper-containing dust or have skin contact if you work in the industry of mining copper or

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processing the ore. You may breathe high levels if you grind or weld copper metal.

### How can copper affect my health?

Copper is essential for good health, but high amounts can be harmful. Long-term exposure to copper dust can irritate your nose, mouth, and eyes, and cause headaches, dizziness, nausea, and diarrhea.

Drinking water with higher than normal levels of copper may cause vomiting, diarrhea, stomach cramps, and nausea. Intentionally high intakes of copper can cause liver and kidney damage and even death.

### How likely is copper to cause cancer?

We do not know whether copper can cause cancer in humans. The EPA has determined that copper is not classifiable as to carcinogenicity.

### How can copper affect children?

Exposure to high levels of copper will result in the same type of effects in children and adults. Studies in animals suggest that the young children may have more severe effects than adults; we do not know if this would also be true in humans. There is a very small percentage of infants and children who are unusually sensitive to copper.

We do not know if copper can cause birth defects or other developmental effects in humans. Studies in animals suggest that ingestion of high levels of copper may cause a decrease in fetal growth.

### How can families reduce the risk of exposure to copper?

- The greatest potential source of copper exposure is through drinking water, especially in water that is first drawn in the morning after sitting in copper pipes and brass faucets overnight.
- To reduce exposure, run the water for at least 15-30 seconds before using it.
- If you are exposed to copper at work, you may carry

copper home on your skin, clothes, or tools. You can avoid this by showering, and changing clothing before leaving work, and your work clothes should be kept separate from other clothes and laundered separately.

### Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to copper?

Copper is normally found in all tissues of the body, blood, urine, feces, hair, and nails. High levels of copper in these samples can show that you have been exposed to higher than normal levels of copper. Tests to measure copper levels in the body are not routinely available at the doctor's office because they require special equipment. These tests cannot tell the extent of exposure or whether you will experience harmful effects.

### Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA has determined that drinking water should not contain more than 1.3 milligrams of copper per liter of water (1.3 mg/L).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set a limit of 0.1 mg per cubic meter (0.1 mg/m<sup>3</sup>) of copper fumes (vapor generated from heating copper) and 1 mg/m<sup>3</sup> of copper dusts (fine metallic copper particles) and mists (aerosol of soluble copper) in workroom air during an 8-hour work shift, 40-hour workweek.

The Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine recommends dietary allowances (RDAs) of 340 micrograms (340 µg) of copper per day for children aged 1-3 years, 440 µg/day for children aged 4-8 years, 700 µg/day for children aged 9-13 years, 890 µg/day for children aged 14-18 years, and 900 µg/day for adults.

### References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2002. Toxicological Profile for Copper (Draft for Public Comment). 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 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.

