FACT SHEET

Facts About Personal Cleaning and Disposal of Contaminated Clothing

Some kinds of chemical accidents or attacks may cause you to come in contact with dangerous chemicals. Coming in contact with a dangerous chemical may make it necessary for you to remove and dispose of your clothing right away and then wash yourself. Removing your clothing and washing your body will reduce or remove the chemical so that it is no longer a hazard. This process is called decontamination.

People are decontaminated for two primary reasons:
1. to prevent the chemical from being further absorbed by their body or from spreading on their body, and
2. to prevent the chemical from spreading to other people, including medical personnel, who must handle or who might come in contact with the person who is contaminated with the chemical.

Most chemical agents can penetrate clothing and are absorbed rapidly through the skin. Therefore, the most important and most effective decontamination for any chemical exposure is decontamination done within the first minute or two after exposure.

How to know if you need to wash yourself and dispose of your clothing
In most cases, emergency coordinators will let you know if a dangerous chemical has been released and will tell you what to do.

In general, exposure to a chemical in its liquid or solid form will require you to remove your clothing and then thoroughly wash your exposed skin. Exposure to a chemical in its vapor (gas) form generally requires you only to remove your clothing and the source of the toxic vapor.

If you think you have been exposed to a chemical release, but you have not heard from emergency coordinators, you can follow the washing and clothing disposal advice in the next section.

What to do
Act quickly and follow the instructions of local emergency coordinators. Every situation can be different, so local emergency coordinators might have special instructions for you to follow. The three most important things to do if you think you may have been exposed to a dangerous chemical are to (1) quickly remove your clothing, (2) wash yourself, and (3) dispose of your clothing. Here's how:

- *Removing your clothing:*
    - o Quickly take off clothing that has a chemical on it. Any clothing that has to be pulled over your head should be cut off instead of being pulled over your head.
    - o If you are helping other people remove their clothing, try to avoid touching any contaminated areas, and remove the clothing as quickly as possible.
- *Washing yourself:*

- o As quickly as possible, wash any chemicals from your skin with large amounts of soap and water. Washing with soap and water will help protect you from any chemicals on your body.
  - o If your eyes are burning or your vision is blurred, rinse your eyes with plain water for 10 to 15 minutes. If you wear contacts, remove them and put them with the contaminated clothing. Do not put the contacts back in your eyes (even if they are not disposable contacts). If you wear eyeglasses, wash them with soap and water. You can put your eyeglasses back on after you wash them.
- *Disposing of your clothes:*
  - o After you have washed yourself, place your clothing inside a plastic bag. Avoid touching contaminated areas of the clothing. If you can't avoid touching contaminated areas, or you aren't sure where the contaminated areas are, wear rubber gloves or put the clothing in the bag using tongs, tool handles, sticks, or similar objects. Anything that touches the contaminated clothing should also be placed in the bag. If you wear contacts, put them in the plastic bag, too.
  - o Seal the bag, and then seal that bag inside another plastic bag. Disposing of your clothing in this way will help protect you and other people from any chemicals that might be on your clothes.
  - o When the local or state health department or emergency personnel arrive, tell them what you did with your clothes. The health department or emergency personnel will arrange for further disposal. Do not handle the plastic bags yourself.

After you have removed your clothing, washed yourself, and disposed of your clothing, you should dress in clothing that is not contaminated. Clothing that has been stored in drawers or closets is unlikely to be contaminated, so it would be a good choice for you to wear.

You should avoid coming in contact with other people who may have been exposed but who have not yet changed their clothes or washed. Move away from the area where the chemical was released when emergency coordinators tell you to do so.

How you can get more information about personal cleaning and disposal of contaminated clothing

You can contact one of the following:
- State and local health departments
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
  - o Public Response Hotline (CDC)
    - ▪ English (888) 246-2675
    - ▪ Español (888) 246-2857
    - ▪ TTY (866) 874-2646
  - o Emergency Preparedness and Response Web site (http://www.bt.cdc.gov/)
  - o E-mail inquiries: cdcresponse@ashastd.org
  - o Mail inquiries:
    Public Inquiry c/o BPRP
    Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Planning
    Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
    Mailstop C-18

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1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333

This fact sheet is based on CDC's best current information. It may be updated as new information becomes available.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) protects people's health and safety by preventing and controlling diseases and injuries; enhances health decisions by providing credible information on critical health issues; and promotes healthy living through strong partnerships with local, national, and international organizations.

For more information, visit www.bt.cdc.gov or call the CDC public response hotline
at (888) 246-2675 (English), (888) 246-2857 (Español), or (866) 874-2646 (TTY)

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