

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about chromium. 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 chromium occurs from ingesting contaminated food or drinking water or breathing contaminated workplace air. Chromium(VI) at high levels can damage the nose and can cause cancer. Chromium has been found at 1,036 of the 1,591 National Priority List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is chromium?

Chromium is a naturally occurring element found in rocks, animals, plants, soil, and in volcanic dust and gases. Chromium is present in the environment in several different forms. The most common forms are chromium(0), chromium(III), and chromium(VI). No taste or odor is associated with chromium compounds.

Chromium(III) occurs naturally in the environment and is an essential nutrient. Chromium(VI) and chromium(0) are generally produced by industrial processes.

The metal chromium, which is the chromium(0) form, is used for making steel. Chromium(VI) and chromium(III) are used for chrome plating, dyes and pigments, leather tanning, and wood preserving.

What happens to chromium when it enters the environment?

- Chromium enters the air, water, and soil mostly in the chromium(III) and chromium(VI) forms.
- In air, chromium compounds are present mostly as fine dust particles which eventually settle over land and water.
- Chromium can strongly attach to soil and only a small

amount can dissolve in water and move deeper in the soil to underground water.

- Fish do not accumulate much chromium in their bodies from water.

How might I be exposed to chromium?

- Eating food containing chromium(III).
- Breathing contaminated workplace air or skin contact during use in the workplace.
- Drinking contaminated well water.
- Living near uncontrolled hazardous waste sites containing chromium or industries that use chromium.

How can chromium affect my health?

Chromium(III) is an essential nutrient that helps the body use sugar, protein, and fat.

Breathing high levels of chromium(VI) can cause irritation to the nose, such as runny nose, nosebleeds, and ulcers and holes in the nasal septum.

Ingesting large amounts of chromium(VI) can cause stomach upsets and ulcers, convulsions, kidney and liver damage, and even death.

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

Skin contact with certain chromium(VI) compounds can cause skin ulcers. Some people are extremely sensitive to chromium(VI) or chromium(III). Allergic reactions consisting of severe redness and swelling of the skin have been noted.

How likely is chromium to cause cancer?

Several studies have shown that chromium(VI) compounds can increase the risk of lung cancer. Animal studies have also shown an increased risk of cancer.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has determined that chromium(VI) is a human carcinogen.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that certain chromium(VI) compounds are known to cause cancer in humans.

The EPA has determined that chromium(VI) in air is a human carcinogen.

How can chromium affect children?

We do not know if exposure to chromium will result in birth defects or other developmental effects in people. Birth defects have been observed in animals exposed to chromium(VI).

It is likely that health effects seen in children exposed to high amounts of chromium will be similar to the effects seen in adults.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to chromium?

Children should avoid playing in soils near uncontrolled hazardous waste sites where chromium may have been discarded.

Although chromium(III) is an essential nutrient, you should avoid excessive use of dietary supplements containing chromium.

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

Since chromium(III) is an essential element and naturally occurs in food, there will always be some level of chromium in your body. There are tests to measure the level of chromium in hair, urine, and blood. These tests are most useful for people exposed to high levels. These tests cannot determine the exact levels of chromium that you may have been exposed to or predict how the levels in your tissues will affect your health.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

EPA has set a limit of 100 µg chromium(III) and chromium(VI) per liter of drinking water (100 µg/L).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set limits of 500 µg water soluble chromium(III) compounds per cubic meter of workplace air (500 µg/m³), 1,000 µg/m³ for metallic chromium(0) and insoluble chromium compounds, and 52 µg/m³ for chromium(VI) compounds for 8-hour work shifts and 40-hour work weeks.

References

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

