

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about nickel. 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. This information is important 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:** Nickel is a hard, silvery-white metal used to make stainless steel and other metal alloys. Skin effects are the most common effects in people who are sensitive to nickel. Workers who breathed very large amounts of nickel compounds have developed lung and nasal sinus cancers. Nickel has been found in at least 709 of the 1,430 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### What is nickel?

(Pronounced nĭk'əl)

Nickel is a very abundant element. In the environment, it is found primarily combined with oxygen (oxides) or sulfur (sulfides). It is found in all soils and is emitted from volcanos.

Pure nickel is a hard, silvery-white metal that is combined with other metals to form mixtures called alloys. Some of the metals that nickel can be alloyed with are iron, copper, chromium, and zinc. These alloys are used in the making of metal coins and jewelry and in industry for making metal items.

Nickel compounds are also used for nickel plating, to color ceramics, to make some batteries, and as substances known as catalysts that increase the rate of chemical reactions. Nickel and its compounds have no characteristic odor or taste.

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

- Small nickel particles in the air settle to the ground or are taken out of the air in rain.
- Much of the nickel in the environment is found with soil and sediments because nickel attaches to particles that contain iron or manganese, which are often present in soil and sediments.

- Nickel does not appear to collect in fish, plants, or animals used for food.

### How might I be exposed to nickel?

- By breathing air or smoking tobacco containing nickel.
- By eating food containing nickel, which is the major source of exposure for most people.
- By drinking water which contains small amounts of nickel.
- By handling coins and touching other metals containing nickel, such as jewelry.

### How can nickel affect my health?

Nickel is required to maintain health in animals. A small amount of nickel is probably essential for humans, although a lack of nickel has not been found to affect the health of humans.

The most common adverse health effect of nickel in humans is an allergic reaction. People can become sensitive to nickel when jewelry or other things containing it are in direct contact with the skin. Once a person is sensitized to nickel, further contact with it will produce a reaction. The most common reaction is a skin rash at the site of contact.

Less frequently, some people who are sensitive to nickel

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

have asthma attacks following exposure to nickel. People who are sensitive to nickel have reactions when it is in contact with the skin, and some sensitized persons react when they eat nickel in food, drink it in water, or breathe dust containing it.

Lung effects, including chronic bronchitis and reduced lung function, have been observed in workers who breathed large amounts of nickel. Current levels of nickel in workplace air are much lower than in the past, and today few workers show symptoms of nickel exposure.

People who are not sensitive to it must eat very large amounts of nickel to show adverse health effects. Workers who accidentally drank water containing very high levels of nickel (100,000 times more than in normal drinking water) had stomachaches and effects on their blood and kidneys.

Animal studies show that breathing high levels of nickel compounds may result in inflammation of the respiratory tract. Eating or drinking large amounts of nickel has been reported to cause lung disease in dogs and rats and to affect the stomach, blood, liver, kidneys, immune system, and reproduction and development in rats and mice.

### How likely is nickel to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that nickel and certain nickel compounds may reasonably be anticipated to be carcinogens. Cancers of the lung and nasal sinus have resulted when workers breathed dust containing high levels of nickel compounds while working in nickel refineries or nickel processing plants.

When rats and mice breathed nickel compounds for a lifetime, nickel compounds that were hard to dissolve caused cancer, while a soluble nickel compound did not cause cancer.

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

Measurements of the amount of nickel in your blood, feces, and urine can be used to estimate your exposure to nickel. These measurements are most useful if the type of nickel compound you have been exposed to is known. However, these tests cannot predict whether you will experience any health effects.

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

The EPA recommends that children drink water containing no more than 0.04 milligrams of nickel per liter of water (0.04 mg/L) for 1-10 days of exposure.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set an occupational exposure limit of 1 milligram of nickel per cubic meter of air (1 mg/m<sup>3</sup>) for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

### Glossary

Carcinogen: A substance with the ability to cause cancer.

CAS: Chemical Abstracts Service.

Milligram (mg): One thousandth of a gram.

Sediments: Mud and debris that have settled to the bottom of a body of water.

Soluble: Dissolves in water.

### References

This ToxFAQs information is taken from the 1997 Toxicological Profile for Nickel (update) produced by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Public Health Service, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service in Atlanta, GA.

**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.

