

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about ethylbenzene. 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:** Ethylbenzene is a colorless liquid found in a number of products including gasoline and paints. Breathing very high levels can cause dizziness and throat and eye irritation. Ethylbenzene has been found in at least 731 of the 1,467 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### What is ethylbenzene?

(Pronounced ěth' əl bĕn' zĕn')

Ethylbenzene is a colorless, flammable liquid that smells like gasoline. It is found in natural products such as coal tar and petroleum and is also found in manufactured products such as inks, insecticides, and paints.

Ethylbenzene is used primarily to make another chemical, styrene. Other uses include as a solvent, in fuels, and to make other chemicals.

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

- Ethylbenzene moves easily into the air from water and soil.
- It takes about 3 days for ethylbenzene to be broken down in air into other chemicals.
- Ethylbenzene may be released to water from industrial discharges or leaking underground storage tanks.
- In surface water, ethylbenzene breaks down by reacting with other chemicals found naturally in water.
- In soil, it is broken down by soil bacteria.

### How might I be exposed to ethylbenzene?

- Breathing air containing ethylbenzene, particularly in areas near factories or highways.
- Drinking contaminated tap water.
- Working in an industry where ethylbenzene is used or made.
- Using products containing it, such as gasoline, carpet glues, varnishes, and paints.

### How can ethylbenzene affect my health?

Limited information is available on the effects of ethylbenzene on people's health. The available information shows dizziness, throat and eye irritation, tightening of the chest, and a burning sensation in the eyes of people exposed to high levels of ethylbenzene in air.

Animals studies have shown effects on the nervous system, liver, kidneys, and eyes from breathing ethylbenzene in air.

### How likely is ethylbenzene to cause cancer?

The EPA has determined that ethylbenzene is not classified as to human carcinogenicity.

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

No studies in people have shown that ethylbenzene exposure can result in cancer. Two available animal studies suggest that ethylbenzene may cause tumors.

### **How can ethylbenzene affect children?**

Children may be exposed to ethylbenzene through inhalation of consumer products, including gasoline, paints, inks, pesticides, and carpet glue. We do not know whether children are more sensitive to the effects of ethylbenzene than adults.

It is not known whether ethylbenzene can affect the development of the human fetus. Animal studies have shown that when pregnant animals were exposed to ethylbenzene in air, their babies had an increased number of birth defects.

### **How can families reduce the risk of exposure to ethylbenzene?**

Exposure to ethylbenzene vapors from household products and newly installed carpeting can be minimized by using adequate ventilation.

Household chemicals should be stored out of reach of children to prevent accidental poisoning. Always store household chemicals in their original containers; never store them in containers children would find attractive to eat or drink from, such as old soda bottles. Gasoline should be stored in a gasoline can with a locked cap.

Sometimes older children sniff household chemicals, including ethylbenzene, in an attempt to get high. Talk with your children about the dangers of sniffing chemicals.

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

Ethylbenzene is found in the blood, urine, breath, and

some body tissues of exposed people. The most common way to test for ethylbenzene is in the urine. This test measures substances formed by the breakdown of ethylbenzene. This test needs to be done within a few hours after exposure occurs, because the substances leave the body very quickly.

These tests can show you were exposed to ethylbenzene, but cannot predict the kind of health effects that might occur.

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

The EPA has set a maximum contaminant level of 0.7 milligrams of ethylbenzene per liter of drinking water (0.7 mg/L).

The EPA requires that spills or accidental releases into the environment of 1,000 pounds or more of ethylbenzene be reported to the EPA.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set an occupational exposure limit of 100 parts of ethylbenzene per million parts of air (100 ppm) for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

### **References**

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1999. Toxicological profile for ethylbenzene. 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.

