

Tetrachloroethylene - ToxFAQs™

CAS # 127-18-4

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about tetrachloroethylene. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-800-232-4636. 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: Tetrachloroethylene is a manufactured chemical used for dry cleaning and metal degreasing and in the aerospace industry. Exposure to very high concentrations of tetrachloroethylene can cause dizziness, headaches, sleepiness, incoordination, confusion, nausea, unconsciousness, and even death. Tetrachloroethylene has been found in at least 949 of the 1,854 National Priorities List sites identified by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is tetrachloroethylene?

Tetrachloroethylene is a nonflammable colorless liquid. Other names for tetrachloroethylene include perchloroethylene, PCE, perc, tetrachloroethene, and perchlor. Most people can smell tetrachloroethylene when it is present in the air at a level of 1 part in 1 million parts of air (1 ppm) or more.

Tetrachloroethylene is used as a dry cleaning agent and metal degreasing solvent. It is also used as a starting material (building block) for making other chemicals and is used in some consumer products.

What happens to tetrachloroethylene when it enters the environment?

- Tetrachloroethylene can be released into air, water, and soil at places where it is produced or used.
- Tetrachloroethylene breaks down very slowly in the air and so it can be transported long distances in the air. Half of the amount in the air will degrade in approximately 100 days.
- Tetrachloroethylene evaporates quickly from water into air. It is generally slow to break down in water.
- Tetrachloroethylene may evaporate quickly from shallow soils or may filter through the soil and into the groundwater below. It is generally slow to break down in soil.

How might I be exposed to tetrachloroethylene?

- When you bring clothes from the dry cleaners, they will release small amounts of tetrachloroethylene into the air.
- When you drink water containing tetrachloroethylene, you are exposed to it. You might also be exposed to tetrachloroethylene that is released into the air during showering and bathing.
- People residing near contaminated sites or dry cleaning locations may be exposed to higher levels than the general population.
- People working in the dry cleaning industries or using metal degreasing products may be exposed to elevated levels of tetrachloroethylene.

How can tetrachloroethylene affect my health?

Breathing high levels of tetrachloroethylene for a brief period may cause dizziness or drowsiness, headache, and incoordination; higher levels may cause unconsciousness and even death.

Exposure for longer periods to low levels of tetrachloroethylene may cause changes in mood, memory, attention, reaction time, and vision.

Studies in animals exposed to tetrachloroethylene have shown liver and kidney effects, and changes in brain chemistry, but we do not know what these findings mean for humans.

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How likely is tetrachloroethylene to cause cancer?

Studies in humans suggest that exposure to tetrachloroethylene might lead to a higher risk of getting bladder cancer, multiple myeloma, or non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

In animals, tetrachloroethylene has been shown to cause cancers of the liver, kidney, and blood system.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) considers tetrachloroethylene to be reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen. EPA considers tetrachloroethylene likely to be carcinogenic to humans by all routes of exposure. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) considers tetrachloroethylene probably carcinogenic to humans.

How can tetrachloroethylene affect children?

It is not known whether children are more susceptible than adults to the effects of tetrachloroethylene.

A few studies in humans have suggested that exposure to tetrachloroethylene increased the numbers of babies with birth defects, but these studies were not large enough to clearly answer the question. Studies in animals exposed by inhalation or stomach tube have not shown clear evidence of specific birth defects.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to tetrachloroethylene?

- Tetrachloroethylene has been found in low levels in some food. You can minimize the risk of your family's exposure by peeling and thoroughly washing fruits and vegetables before cooking.
- Use bottled water if you have concerns about the presence of tetrachloroethylene in your tap water. You may also contact local drinking water authorities and follow their advice.

- Prevent children from playing in dirt or eating dirt if you live near a waste site that has tetrachloroethylene.
- Tetrachloroethylene is widely used as a scouring solvent that removes oils from fabrics, as a carrier solvent, as a fabric finish or water repellent, and as a metal degreaser/cleaner. Follow instructions on product labels to minimize exposure to tetrachloroethylene.

Is there a medical test to determine whether I've been exposed to tetrachloroethylene?

Tetrachloroethylene and its breakdown products (metabolites) can be measured in blood and urine. However, the detection of tetrachloroethylene or its metabolites cannot predict the kind of health effects that might develop from that exposure. Because tetrachloroethylene and its metabolites leave the body fairly rapidly, the tests need to be conducted within days after exposure.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set an 8-hour time weighted average permissible exposure limit of 100 ppm, an acceptable ceiling exposure limit of 200 ppm, and a maximum peak of 300 ppm (not to be exceeded for more than 5 minutes of any 3-hour period).

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends that workplace exposure to tetrachloroethylene be minimized due to concerns about its carcinogenicity.

Reference

This ToxFAQs™ information is taken from the 2019 Toxicological Profile for Tetrachloroethylene 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 and Human Health Sciences, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-57, Atlanta, GA 30329-4027.

Phone: 1-800-232-4636

ToxFAQs™ on the web: www.atsdr.cdc.gov/ToxFAQs

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.