

Arsenic Fact Sheet

What is arsenic?

Arsenic is a naturally occurring substance found in the earth's crust. Because of this, arsenic can be found in the air, ground, and groundwater. Arsenic cannot be destroyed in the environment, but can change forms: fish and shellfish can accumulate arsenic, but mostly in a form that is not harmful to humans.

Industrial uses of arsenic have included the manufacture of pressure treated woods, pesticides, and fertilizers. Arsenic was also used in the glass production process to remove air bubbles and color from sheet glass. Manufacturers of treated lumber and builders working on the construction of houses, playgrounds, decks and other residential structures have stopped using pressure treated wood containing arsenic and have switched to safer forms of treated wood. However, wood treated with arsenic is still used for non-residential structures and can be present in older existing structures still in use.

How might I be exposed to arsenic?

- Ingestion of small amounts present in food and water, or breathing air containing arsenic (e.g. cigarette smoking).
- Breathing in sawdust from pressure treated wood or smoke from pressure treated wood that is being burned.
- Applying pesticides or fertilizers that contain arsenic
- Working in jobs like lead or copper smelting, pesticide or fertilizer manufacture or application.
- Ingestion of arsenic contaminated soil or through direct contact with arsenic contaminated soil.

What are the health effects of arsenic?

Long-term exposure to arsenic can cause darkening of the skin and the appearance of small corns or warts on the palms of hands, soles of feet and the torso. Long-term exposure to arsenic also increases the risk of developing cancer of the liver, bladder, kidneys, prostate, lungs and skin.

The results of arsenic exposure are dose dependent. The health effects of arsenic exposure at high levels can cause immediate, acute symptoms, including nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, irritation of the nose and throat, abnormal heart rhythms and nerve damage resulting in pin and needles sensation of the hands and feet. At very high levels, arsenic can cause death.

