

WHAT IS ATSDR?

ATSDR is the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a federal public health agency. ATSDR is part of the Public Health Service in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ATSDR is not a regulatory agency like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Created by Superfund legislation in 1980, ATSDR's mission is to prevent exposure and adverse human health effects and diminished quality of life associated with exposure to hazardous substances from waste sites, unplanned releases, and other sources of pollution present in the environment. Through its programs—including surveillance, registries, health studies, environmental health education, and applied substance-specific research—and by working with other federal, state, and local government agencies, ATSDR acts to protect public health.

WHAT IS A PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY?

A Public Health Advisory is a way for ATSDR to respond quickly when hazardous substances released into the environment pose an immediate and significant danger to people's health. It is a notice sent directly from ATSDR's administrator to EPA's administrator that alerts EPA to a public health threat. Other government agencies—such as state and local health and environmental agencies—are also notified about the problem. ATSDR works with all these agencies to take action to protect the public.

A Public Health Advisory reports information available about a release of toxic material, whether people might be exposed to it, and what harm exposure might cause. Public Health Advisories consider—

- what the levels (or “concentrations”) of hazardous substances are
- whether people might be exposed to contamination and how (through “exposure pathways” such as breathing air, drinking or contacting water, contacting or eating soil, or eating food)
- what harm the substances might cause to people (or the contaminants’ “toxicity”)
- whether working or living nearby might affect people's health
- other dangers to people, such as unsafe buildings, abandoned mine shafts, or other physical hazards

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY?

Because ATSDR Public Health Advisories address an immediate and significant danger to people's health, they usually result in quick action by regulatory and health agencies.

Recommendations ATSDR makes in Public Health Advisories cover many activities by EPA, state environmental and health agencies, and by ATSDR. Public Health Advisory recommendations can contribute to —

- placing the site on the National Priorities List (or Superfund list)
- relocating exposed people
- site cleanup
- keeping people away from contamination and physical dangers — for example, by fencing the site

- giving residents acceptable drinking water
- community environmental health education for residents and health care providers to inform them about site contamination, harmful health effects, and ways to reduce or prevent health effects
- an ATSDR or state health study

In addition, a Public Health Advisory can lead to other ATSDR activities — specifically, a Public Health Assessment.

ATSDR Public Health Assessments are like Public Health Advisories, but are more detailed. They rely on three main types of information —

- *environmental data*, such as information available on the contaminants and how people could come in contact with them
- *health data*, including available information on communitywide rates of illness, disease, and death compared with national and state rates
- *community concerns*, such as reports from the public about how the site affects their health or quality of life

Fact sheets are available on Public Health Assessments and other ATSDR public health activities. If you want to know more about ATSDR, or if you have health concerns about a site or information to share about ways people might have been or might now be exposed to hazardous substances, please contact the ATSDR Community Involvement Team, visit the ATSDR web site, or call the ATSDR toll-free information line.

Community Involvement Team
 ATSDR - Division of Health Assessment and Consultation
 1600 Clifton Road, NE (E56)
 Atlanta, Georgia 30333

ATSDR web site at <http://atsdr1.atsdr.cdc.gov:8080/>

ATSDR information line (888) 42-ATSDR, that's (888) 422-8737