
Ammonia

Patient Information Sheet

This handout provides information and follow-up instructions for persons who have been exposed to ammonia gas or ammonium hydroxide solution.

What is ammonia?

Ammonia is a colorless, highly irritating gas with a sharp, suffocating odor. It easily dissolves in water to form a caustic solution called ammonium hydroxide. It is not highly flammable, but containers of ammonia may explode when exposed to high heat. About 80% of the ammonia produced is used in fertilizers. It is also used as a refrigerant and in the manufacture of plastics, explosives, pesticides, and other chemicals. It is found in many household and industrial-strength cleaning solutions.

What immediate health effects can result from ammonia exposure?

Most people are exposed to ammonia from breathing the gas. They will notice the pungent odor and experience burning of the eyes, nose, and throat after breathing even small amounts. With higher doses, coughing or choking may occur. Exposure to high levels of ammonia can cause death from a swollen throat or from chemical burns to the lungs. Skin contact with ammonia-containing liquids may cause burns. Eye exposure to concentrated gas or liquid can cause serious corneal burns or blindness. Drinking a concentrated ammonia solution can cause burns to the mouth, throat, and stomach. Generally, the severity of symptoms depends on the degree of exposure.

Can ammonia poisoning be treated?

There is no antidote for ammonia poisoning, but ammonia's effects can be treated, and most people recover. Persons who have experienced serious signs and symptoms (such as severe or persistent coughing or burns in the throat) may need to be hospitalized.

Are any future health effects likely to occur?

A single small exposure from which a person recovers quickly is not likely to cause delayed or long-term effects. After a severe exposure, injury to the eyes, lungs, skin, or digestive system may continue to develop for 18 to 24 hours, and serious delayed effects, such as gastric perforation, chronic pulmonary obstructive disease, or glaucoma, are possible.

What tests can be done if a person has been exposed to ammonia?

Specific tests for the presence of ammonia in blood or urine generally are not useful to the doctor. If a severe exposure has occurred, blood and urine analyses, chest x-rays, and other tests may show whether the lungs have been injured. Testing is not needed in every case. If ammonia contacts the eyes, the doctor may put a special dye in the eyes and examine them with a magnifying lamp.

Where can more information about ammonia be found?

More information about ammonia can be obtained from your regional poison control center; your state, county, or local health department; the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR); your doctor; or a clinic in your area that specializes in occupational or environmental health. If the exposure happened at work, you may wish to discuss it with your employer, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), or the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Ask the person who gave you this form for help in locating these telephone numbers.

Follow-up Instructions

Keep this page and take it with you to your next appointment. Follow *only* the instructions checked below.

- Call your doctor or the Emergency Department if you develop any unusual signs or symptoms within the next 24 hours, especially:
 - coughing
 - difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
 - wheezing or high-pitched voice
 - chest pain or tightness
 - increased pain or a discharge from exposed eyes
 - increased redness or pain or a pus-like discharge in the area of a skin burn
 - stomach pain or vomiting

- No follow-up appointment is necessary unless you develop any of the symptoms listed above.
- Call for an appointment with Dr. _____ in the practice of _____.
When you call for your appointment, please say that you were treated in the Emergency Department at _____ Hospital by _____ and were advised to be seen again in _____ days.
- Return to the Emergency Department/ _____ Clinic on (date) _____ at _____ AM/PM for a follow-up examination.
- Do not perform vigorous physical activities for 1 to 2 days.
- You may resume everyday activities including driving and operating machinery.
- Do not return to work for _____ days.
- You may return to work on a limited basis. See instructions below.
- Avoid exposure to cigarette smoke for 72 hours; smoke may worsen the condition of your lungs.
- Avoid drinking alcoholic beverages for at least 24 hours; alcohol may worsen injury to your stomach or have other effects.
- Avoid taking the following medications: _____
- You may continue taking the following medication(s) that your doctor(s) prescribed for you: _____

- Other instructions: _____

- Provide the Emergency Department with the name and the number of your primary care physician so that the ED can send him or her a record of your emergency department visit.
- You or your physician can get more information on the chemical by contacting: _____
_____ or _____, or by checking out the following Internet Web sites: _____; _____.

Signature of patient _____ Date _____

Signature of physician _____ Date _____