

Nitrogen Oxides Patient Information Sheet

This handout provides information and follow-up instructions for persons who have been exposed to nitrogen oxides.

What are nitrogen oxides?

Nitrogen oxides are a mixture of gases that each contain nitrogen and oxygen. Nitrogen oxides are formed naturally when fossil fuels (e.g., coal, oil, gas, kerosene) are burned and when silage containing nitrate fertilizer ferments in storage silos. They are also formed during electric arc welding, electroplating, and engraving. They are part of airborne smog and are partly indirectly responsible for the burning eyes, nose, and throat caused by air pollution, through formation of the intensely irritating compound peroxyacetylnitrate, PAN.

What immediate health effects can be caused by exposure to nitrogen oxides?

Breathing low levels of nitrogen oxides may cause brief, nonspecific symptoms such as cough, shortness of breath, tiredness, and nausea. However, even if removed from exposure, a person who has breathed nitrogen oxides can develop more serious lung injury over the next 1 to 2 days. Exposure to massive concentrations can cause sudden death due to lung injury and suffocation or choking. Generally, the more serious the exposure, the more severe the symptoms.

Can nitrogen oxide poisoning be treated?

There is no antidote for nitrogen oxide poisoning. Treatment for exposure usually involves giving the patient oxygen and medications to make breathing easier.

Are any future health effects likely to occur?

A single small exposure from which a person recovers quickly may not cause delayed or long-term effects. After a serious exposure or repeated exposures, a patient may develop asthma or other lung conditions.

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

Specific tests for the presence of nitrogen oxides in blood or urine generally are not useful to the doctor. If a severe exposure has occurred, blood and urine analyses and other tests may show whether damage has been done to the lungs, heart, and brain. Testing is not needed in every case.

Where can more information about nitrogen oxides be found?

More information about nitrogen oxides 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 and 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 48 to 72 hours, especially:

- coughing or wheezing
- difficulty breathing, shortness of breath, or chest pain
- weakness, fatigue, or flu-like symptoms
- increased redness or pain or a pus-like discharge in the area of a skin burn

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 _____