



# PUBLIC HEALTH STATEMENT

## POLYCYCLIC AROMATIC HYDROCARBONS (PAHs)

Division of Toxicology

August 1995

This Public Health Statement is the summary chapter from the Toxicological Profile for Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs). It is one in a series of Public Health Statements about hazardous substances and their health effects. A shorter version, the ToxFAQs™, is also available. This information is important 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. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737.

This statement was prepared to give you information about polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and to emphasize the human health effects that may result from exposure to them. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has identified 1,408 hazardous waste sites as the most serious in the nation. These sites make up the National Priorities List (NPL) and are the sites targeted for long-term federal clean-up activities. PAHs have been found in at least 600 of the sites on the NPL. However, the number of NPL sites evaluated for PAHs is not known. As EPA evaluates more sites, the number of sites at which PAHs are found may increase. This information is important because exposure to PAHs may cause harmful health effects and because these sites are potential or actual sources of human exposure to PAHs.

When a substance is released from a large area, such as an industrial plant, or from a container, such as a drum or bottle, it enters the environment. This release does not always lead to exposure. You can

be exposed to a substance only when you come in contact with it. You may be exposed by breathing, eating, or drinking substances containing the substance or by skin contact with it.

If you are exposed to substances such as PAHs, many factors will determine whether harmful health effects will occur and what the type and severity of those health effects will be. These factors include the dose (how much), the duration (how long), the route or pathway by which you are exposed (breathing, eating, drinking, or skin contact), the other chemicals to which you are exposed, and your individual characteristics such as age, sex, nutritional status, family traits, lifestyle, and state of health.

### 1.1 WHAT ARE PAHs?

PAHs are a group of chemicals that are formed during the incomplete burning of coal, oil, gas, wood, garbage, or other organic substances, such as tobacco and charbroiled meat. There are more than 100 different PAHs. PAHs generally occur as complex mixtures (for example, as part of combustion products such as soot), not as single compounds. PAHs usually occur naturally, but they can be manufactured as individual compounds for research purposes; however, not as the mixtures found in combustion products. As pure chemicals, PAHs generally exist as colorless, white, or pale yellow-green solids. They can have a faint, pleasant odor. A few PAHs are used in medicines and to make dyes, plastics, and pesticides. Others are contained in asphalt used in road construction. They can also be found in substances such as crude oil, coal, coal tar pitch, creosote, and roofing tar. They are found throughout the environment in the air, water, and soil. They can occur in the air, either

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attached to dust particles or as solids in soil or sediment.

Although the health effects of individual PAHs are not exactly alike, the following 17 PAHs are considered as a group in this profile:

acenaphthene  
acenaphthylene  
anthracene  
benz[a]anthracene  
benzo[a]pyrene  
benzo[e]pyrene  
benzo[b]fluoranthene  
benzo[g,h,i]perylene  
benzo[j]fluoranthene  
benzo[k]fluoranthene  
chrysene  
dibenz[a,h]anthracene  
fluoranthene  
fluorene  
indeno[1,2,3-c,d]pyrene  
phenanthrene  
pyrene

These 17 PAHs were chosen to be included in this profile because (1) more information is available on these than on the others; (2) they are suspected to be more harmful than some of the others, and they exhibit harmful effects that are representative of the PAHs; (3) there is a greater chance that you will be exposed to these PAHs than to the others; and (4) of all the PAHs analyzed, these were the PAHs identified at the highest concentrations at NPL hazardous waste sites.

### 1.2 WHAT HAPPENS TO PAHs WHEN THEY ENTER THE ENVIRONMENT?

PAHs enter the environment mostly as releases to air from volcanoes, forest fires, residential wood

burning, and exhaust from automobiles and trucks. They can also enter surface water through discharges from industrial plants and waste water treatment plants, and they can be released to soils at hazardous waste sites if they escape from storage containers. The movement of PAHs in the environment depends on properties such as how easily they dissolve in water, and how easily they evaporate into the air. PAHs in general do not easily dissolve in water. They are present in air as vapors or stuck to the surfaces of small solid particles. They can travel long distances before they return to earth in rainfall or particle settling. Some PAHs evaporate into the atmosphere from surface waters, but most stick to solid particles and settle to the bottoms of rivers or lakes. In soils, PAHs are most likely to stick tightly to particles. Some PAHs evaporate from surface soils to air. Certain PAHs in soils also contaminate underground water. The PAH content of plants and animals living on the land or in water can be many times higher than the content of PAHs in soil or water. PAHs can break down to longer-lasting products by reacting with sunlight and other chemicals in the air, generally over a period of days to weeks. Breakdown in soil and water generally takes weeks to months and is caused primarily by the actions of microorganisms.

### 1.3 HOW MIGHT I BE EXPOSED TO PAHs?

PAHs are present throughout the environment, and you may be exposed to these substances at home, outside, or at the workplace. Typically, you will not be exposed to an individual PAH, but to a mixture of PAHs.

In the environment, you are most likely to be exposed to PAH vapors or PAHs that are attached to dust and other particles in the air. Sources include

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cigarette smoke, vehicle exhausts, asphalt roads, coal, coal tar, wildfires, agricultural burning, residential wood burning, municipal and industrial waste incineration, and hazardous waste sites. Background levels of some representative PAHs in the air are reported to be 0.02–1.2 nanograms per cubic meter (ng/m<sup>3</sup>; a nanogram is one-millionth of a milligram) in rural areas and 0.15–19.3 ng/m<sup>3</sup> in urban areas. You may be exposed to PAHs in soil near areas where coal, wood, gasoline, or other products have been burned. You may be exposed to PAHs in the soil at or near hazardous waste sites, such as former manufactured-gas factory sites and wood-preserving facilities. PAHs have been found in some drinking water supplies in the United States. Background levels of PAHs in drinking water range from 4 to 24 nanograms per liter (ng/L; a liter is slightly more than a quart).

In the home, PAHs are present in tobacco smoke, smoke from wood fires, creosote-treated wood products, cereals, grains, flour, bread, vegetables, fruits, meat, processed or pickled foods, and contaminated cow's milk or human breast milk. Food grown in contaminated soil or air may also contain PAHs. Cooking meat or other food at high temperatures, which happens during grilling or charring, increases the amount of PAHs in the food. The level of PAHs in the typical U.S. diet is less than 2 parts of total PAHs per billion parts of food (ppb), or less than 2 micrograms per kilogram of food (µg/kg; a microgram is one-thousandth of a milligram).

The primary sources of exposure to PAHs for most of the U.S. population are inhalation of the compounds in tobacco smoke, wood smoke, and ambient air, and consumption of PAHs in foods. For some people, the primary exposure to PAHs occurs

in the workplace. PAHs have been found in coal tar production plants, coking plants, bitumen and asphalt production plants, coal-gasification sites, smoke houses, aluminum production plants, coal tarring facilities, and municipal trash incinerators. Workers may be exposed to PAHs by inhaling engine exhaust and by using products that contain PAHs in a variety of industries such as mining, oil refining, metalworking, chemical production, transportation, and the electrical industry. PAHs have also been found in other facilities where petroleum, petroleum products, or coal are used or where wood, cellulose, corn, or oil are burned. People living near waste sites containing PAHs may be exposed through contact with contaminated air, water, and soil.

### 1.4 HOW CAN PAHs ENTER AND LEAVE MY BODY?

PAHs can enter your body through your lungs when you breathe air that contains them (usually stuck to particles or dust). Cigarette smoke, wood smoke, coal smoke, and smoke from many industrial sites may contain PAHs. People living near hazardous waste sites can also be exposed by breathing air containing PAHs. However, it is not known how rapidly or completely your lungs absorb PAHs. Drinking water and swallowing food, soil, or dust particles that contain PAHs are other routes for these chemicals to enter your body, but absorption is generally slow when PAHs are swallowed. Under normal conditions of environmental exposure, PAHs could enter your body if your skin comes into contact with soil that contains high levels of PAHs (this could occur near a hazardous waste site) or with used crankcase oil or other products (such as creosote) that contain PAHs. The rate at which PAHs enter your body by eating, drinking, or

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through the skin can be influenced by the presence of other compounds that you may be exposed to at the same time with PAHs. PAHs can enter all the tissues of your body that contain fat. They tend to be stored mostly in your kidneys, liver, and fat. Smaller amounts are stored in your spleen, adrenal glands, and ovaries. PAHs are changed by all tissues in the body into many different substances. Some of these substances are more harmful and some are less harmful than the original PAHs. Results from animal studies show that PAHs do not tend to be stored in your body for a long time. Most PAHs that enter the body leave within a few days, primarily in the feces and urine.

### 1.5 HOW CAN PAHs AFFECT MY HEALTH?

PAHs can be harmful to your health under some circumstances. Several of the PAHs, including benz[a]anthracene, benzo[a]pyrene, benzo[b]fluoranthene, benzo[j]fluoranthene, benzo[k]fluoranthene, chrysene, dibenz[a,h]anthracene, and indeno[1,2,3-c,d]pyrene, have caused tumors in laboratory animals when they breathed these substances in the air, when they ate them, or when they had long periods of skin contact with them. Studies of people show that individuals exposed by breathing or skin contact for long periods to mixtures that contain PAHs and other compounds can also develop cancer.

Mice fed high levels of benzo[a]pyrene during pregnancy had difficulty reproducing and so did their offspring. The offspring of pregnant mice fed benzo[a]pyrene also showed other harmful effects, such as birth defects and decreased body weight. Similar effects could occur in people, but we have no information to show that these effects do occur.

Studies in animals have also shown that PAHs can cause harmful effects on skin, body fluids, and the body's system for fighting disease after both short- and long-term exposure. These effects have not been reported in people.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that benz[a]anthracene, benzo[b]fluoranthene, benzo[j]fluoranthene, benzo[k]fluoranthene, benzo[a]pyrene, dibenz[a,h]anthracene, and indeno[1,2,3-c,d]pyrene are known animal carcinogens. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined the following: benz[a]anthracene and benzo[a]pyrene are probably carcinogenic to humans; benzo[b]fluoranthene, benzo[j]fluoranthene, benzo[k]fluoranthene, and indeno[1,2,3-c,d]pyrene are possibly carcinogenic to humans; and anthracene, benzo[g,h,i]perylene, benzo[e]pyrene, chrysene, fluoranthene, fluorene, phenanthrene, and pyrene are not classifiable as to their carcinogenicity to humans. EPA has determined that benz[a]anthracene, benzo[a]pyrene, benzo[b]fluoranthene, benzo[k]fluoranthene, chrysene, dibenz[a,h]anthracene, and indeno[1,2,3-c,d]pyrene are probable human carcinogens and that acenaphthylene, anthracene, benzo[g,h,i]perylene, fluoranthene, fluorene, phenanthrene, and pyrene are not classifiable as to human carcinogenicity. Acenaphthene has not been classified for carcinogenic effects by the DHHS, IARC, or EPA.

### 1.6 IS THERE A MEDICAL TEST TO DETERMINE WHETHER I HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO PAHs?

In your body, PAHs are changed into chemicals that can attach to substances within the body. The presence of PAHs attached to these substances can

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then be measured in body tissues or blood after exposure to PAHs. PAHs or their metabolites can also be measured in urine, blood, or body tissues. Although these tests can show that you have been exposed to PAHs, these tests cannot be used to predict whether any health effects will occur or to determine the extent or source of your exposure to the PAHs. It is not known how effective or informative the tests are after exposure is discontinued. These tests to identify PAHs or their products are not routinely available at a doctor's office because special equipment is required to detect these chemicals.

### 1.7 WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS HAS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT MADE TO PROTECT HUMAN HEALTH?

The federal government has set regulations to protect people from the possible health effects of eating, drinking, or breathing PAHs. EPA has suggested that taking into your body each day the following amounts of individual PAHs is not likely to cause any harmful health effects: 0.3 milligrams (mg) of anthracene, 0.06 mg of acenaphthene, 0.04 mg of fluoranthene, 0.04 mg of fluorene, and 0.03 mg of pyrene per kilogram (kg) of your body weight (one kilogram is equal to 2.2 pounds). Actual exposure for most of the United States population occurs from active or passive inhalation of the compounds in tobacco smoke, wood smoke, and contaminated air, and from eating the compounds in foods. Skin contact with contaminated water, soot, tar, and soil may also occur. Estimates for total exposure in the United States population have been listed as 3 mg/day.

From what is currently known about benzo[a]pyrene, the federal government has developed regulatory standards and guidelines to protect people from the potential health effects of PAHs in drinking water. EPA has provided estimates of levels of total cancer-causing PAHs in lakes and streams associated with a risk of human cancer development. If the following amounts of individual PAHs are released to the environment within a 24-hour period, EPA must be notified: 1 pound of benzo[b]fluoranthene, benzo[a]pyrene, or dibenz[a,h]anthracene; 10 pounds of benz[a]anthracene; 100 pounds of acenaphthene, chrysene, fluoranthene, or indeno[1,2,3-c,d]pyrene; or 5,000 pounds of acenaphthylene, anthracene, benzo[k]fluoranthene, benzo[g,h,i]perylene, fluorene, phenanthrene, or pyrene.

PAHs are generally not produced commercially in the United States except as research chemicals. However, PAHs are found in coal, coal tar, and in the creosote oils, oil mists, and pitches formed from the distillation of coal tars. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) concluded that occupational exposure to coal products can increase the risk of lung and skin cancer in workers. NIOSH established a recommended occupational exposure limit, time-weighted average (REL-TWA) for coal tar products of 0.1 milligram of PAHs per cubic meter of air (0.1 mg/m<sup>3</sup>) for a 10-hour workday, within a 40-hour workweek. The American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) recommends an occupational exposure limit for coal tar products of 0.2 mg/m<sup>3</sup> for an 8-hour workday, within a 40-hour workweek. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has

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established a legally enforceable limit of 0.2 mg/m<sup>3</sup> averaged over an 8-hour exposure period.

Mineral oil mists have been given an IARC classification of 1 (sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity). The OSHA Permissible Exposure Limit (PEL) for mineral oil mist is 5 mg/m<sup>3</sup> averaged over an 8-hour exposure period. NIOSH has concurred with this limit, and has established a recommended occupational exposure limit (REL-TWA) for mineral oil mists of 5 mg/m<sup>3</sup> for a 10-hour work day, 40-hour work week, with a 10 mg/m<sup>3</sup> Short Term Exposure Limit (STEL).

### 1.8 WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?

If you have any more questions or concerns, please contact your community or state health or environmental quality department or:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry  
Division of Toxicology  
1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32  
Atlanta, GA 30333

#### Information line and technical assistance:

Phone: 888-422-8737  
FAX: (770)-488-4178

ATSDR can also tell you the location of occupational and environmental health clinics. These clinics specialize in recognizing, evaluating, and treating illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances.

#### To order toxicological profiles, contact:

National Technical Information Service  
5285 Port Royal Road  
Springfield, VA 22161  
Phone: 800-553-6847 or 703-605-6000

#### Reference

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1995. Toxicological profile for polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

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