

ATSDR Communication Toolkit User's Guide

Introduction

Public health assessments and consultations are a two-way exchange of information between the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's (ATSDR) site assessment team and the community. Community members are key participants in the public health assessment process and should be kept informed. Similarly, health assessors need input from community members for insight into health concerns, experiences, and expectations. Gaining the community's trust is a key step in the public health assessment process. ATSDR health assessors can help foster trusting relationships through effective communication, setting clear expectations, and placing the community at the center of the public health response.

The Purpose of This Toolkit

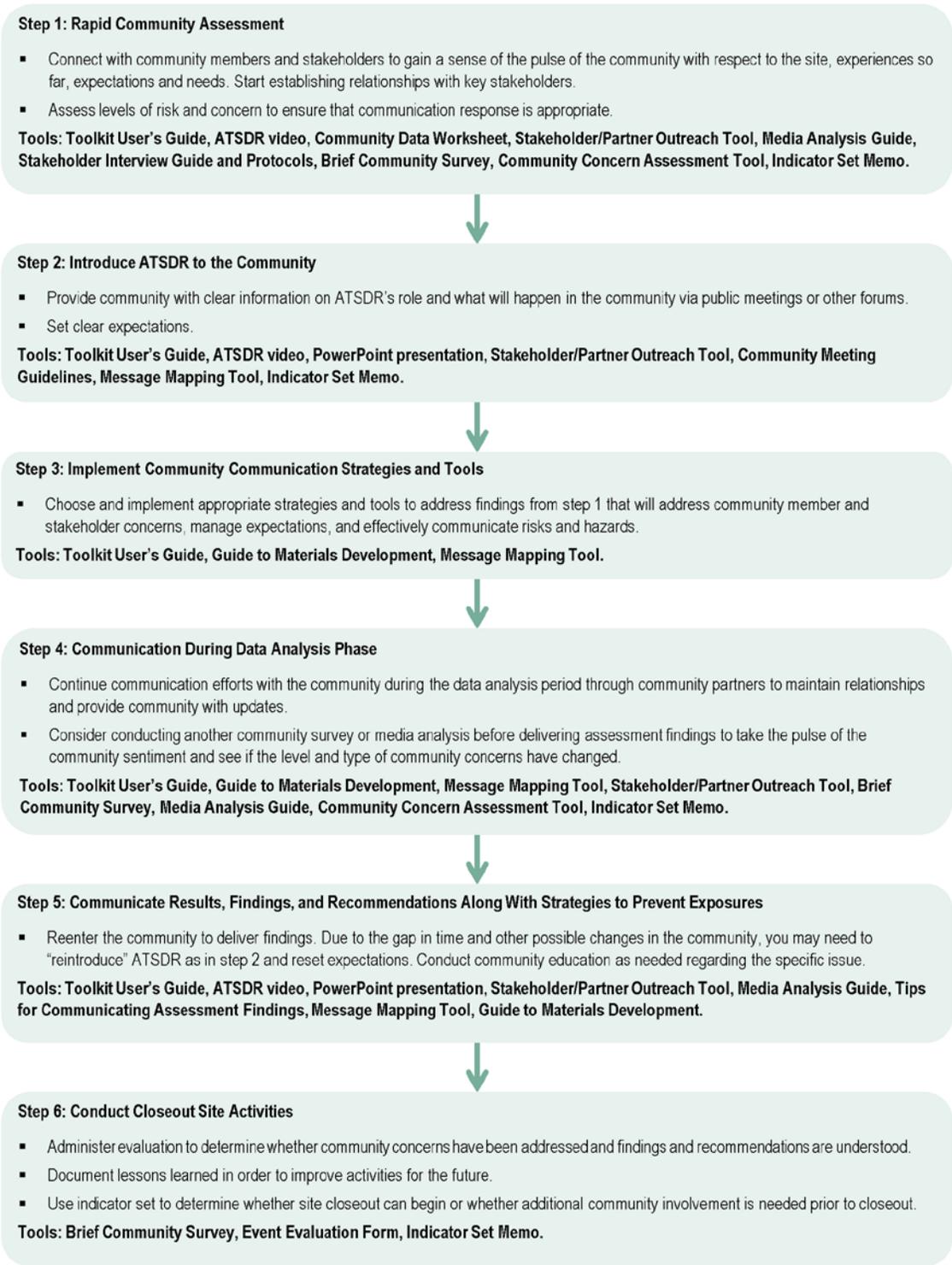
The ATSDR Communication Toolkit (ACT) was developed to aid ATSDR site teams in their communication efforts with local communities. It is **not** intended to introduce a new process or require the use of any specific tool, rather the goals of the toolkit are twofold: to help ensure that ATSDR site team members have the tools that can enhance communication in communities in which they work; to facilitate a better understanding of ATSDR's assessment process.

The objectives of the ATSDR Communication Toolkit are as follows:

- To provide a variety of customizable tools that ATSDR can use to facilitate effective communication with community members.
- To provide guidance on incorporating risk communication principles into communication efforts in communities in order to respond to different levels of community concern.
- To encourage the development of partnerships for information dissemination and community relations between ATSDR and local organizations and businesses in the affected area.
- To help ATSDR site teams set appropriate and realistic expectations for community members and partner organizations with regard to ATSDR's assessment process.
- To facilitate the measurement of the overall effectiveness of the assessment process and ATSDR's communication with impacted communities.

The contents of this toolkit can be used in any way or order that helps to enhance communication with communities, using existing ATSDR processes and procedures. This toolkit is not intended to introduce a new process or require that tools be used in one way. However, examples and options are provided to help you find the best tool to meet your needs.

The following model illustrates the role that strategic communication plays in the **existing** health assessment process, and the possible toolkit pieces that you might find useful at each step.





This model presented here is meant to be used as a guideline. There may be situations where many steps be skipped or revisited. The tools, tips, and templates provided in this toolkit were each developed to address a specific step in the process. More in-depth descriptions of each step and how communication plays into them is provided below.

Step 1: Rapid Community Assessment

This step involves reaching out to community organizations and influencers to develop relationships, gather more information about the community, and determine the level of concern regarding the chemical exposure in the community. Obtaining information on community networks, social-economic trends, and determining whether there have been any previous attempts at community advocacy will provide additional insight into community characteristics.

Step 2: Introduce ATSDR to the Community

This step covers activities that occur when ATSDR first enters a community. In some cases, the community has not interacted with ATSDR before. Therefore, many of the suggested activities and tips in the toolkit relate to initiating relationships with community members and organizations, including conducting a community meeting. These activities also are applicable if ATSDR is known to the community.

Step 3: Implement Community Communication Strategies and Tools

This step involves outreach to the community through stakeholders and partners to ensure that information regarding the health assessment and the level of risk to the community is clearly and widely distributed in a way that accurately portrays risk while acknowledging and reducing possible community concern.

Step 4: Communication During Data Analysis Phase

This step occurs when the health assessor is analyzing data and writing the assessment report. Tools and strategies are provided to ensure that the community receives updates during this time from ATSDR or through partner and stakeholder organizations.

Step 5: Communicate Results, Findings, and Recommendations Along with Strategies to Avoid Exposures

This step occurs when the health assessor returns to the community to provide the results of the assessment. Tips and tools are provided to ensure that the delivery of the findings addresses community concerns and that community members are satisfied with ATSDR's work after the process is completed.

Step 6: Conduct Closeout Activities

For this step, an evaluation tool is provided to help health assessors gauge community satisfaction with ATSDR and the assessment process and determine whether concerns and information needs have been adequately addressed.

Toolkit Materials

Toolkit contents (listed in the table below) can be used for community meetings, presentations, stakeholder engagement, materials development, social media, and more. They are intended to be used at ATSDR health assessors' discretion; however, it is strongly recommended that the evaluation tools be used to ensure that activities implemented are evidence-based. Please note that some tools are repeated as they can be used at more than one step.

Step	Tool	Description
Step 1: Rapid Community Assessment	Toolkit User's Guide	Overview of the toolkit's purpose, contents, and its possible uses.
	Brief Community Survey	Tool to provide valuable information about the public's understanding of a potential hazard.
	Community Data Worksheet	Tool to gather pertinent data about the community that is being served by ATSDR. Information gleaned from the other toolkit tools can supply data for this form.
	Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool	Worksheet to guide the ATSDR site team through the process of identifying and tracking contact information for key stakeholders and potential partners.
	Stakeholder Interview Guide and Protocols	Tools to conduct stakeholder interviews to obtain additional information about the community and how the situation is affecting the community.
	Community Concern Assessment Tool	Tool to determine the level of concern in the community about the chemical exposure.
	Media Analysis Guide	Tips and pointers on how to do a quick media analysis in order to gather data about the site and help determine the level of concern in the community.
	Indicator Set Memo	A set of proposed process and outcome indicators to assess the site team's implementation of communication strategies encouraged by the toolkit, the community's perception of those efforts, and the community's understanding of the information communicated by ATSDR.
Step 2: Introduce ATSDR to the Community	Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool	Worksheet to guide the ATSDR site team through the process of identifying and tracking contact information for key stakeholders and potential partners.

Step	Tool	Description
	Community Meeting Guidelines	Guidelines and tips for holding successful community meetings.
	ATSDR Health Assessment Process Overview Video	Short 6-minute video designed to explain what ATSDR is, what ATSDR's role is, and the health assessment process. The video is designed to help set expectations for the assessment process.
	PowerPoint and Message Mapping Tool	Templates for a PowerPoint presentation that can be used at community meetings and message maps to help health assessors develop messages specific to the community's situation.
	Indicator Set Memo	A set of proposed process and outcome indicators to assess the site team's implementation of communication strategies encouraged by the toolkit, the community's perception of those efforts, and the community's understanding of the information communicated by ATSDR.
Step 3: Implement Community Communication Strategies and Tools	Guide to Materials Development	Guidance on different types of materials that can be developed and how to apply emergency risk communication principles.
	Message Mapping Tool	Message maps to help health assessors develop messages specific to the community's situation.
Step 4: Communication During Data Analysis Phase	Continued Contact During the Assessment Period	Guide to developing content for partners to use in their newsletters, listservs, Web sites, and social media posts to reach the target audience.
	Guide to Materials Development	Guidance on different types of materials that can be developed and how to apply emergency risk communication principles.
	Message Mapping Tool	Message maps to help health assessors develop messages specific to the community's situation.
	Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool	Worksheet to guide the ATSDR site team through the process of identifying and tracking contact information for key stakeholders and potential partners.
	Brief Community Survey	Tool to provide valuable information about the public's understanding of a potential hazard.

Step	Tool	Description
	Media Analysis Guide	Tips and pointers on how to do a quick media analysis in order to gather data about the site and help determine the level of concern of the community.
	Community Concern Assessment Tool	A tool to determine the level of concern in the community about the chemical exposure.
	Indicator Set Memo	A set of proposed process and outcome indicators to assess the site team's implementation of communication strategies encouraged by the toolkit, the community's perception of those efforts, and the community's understanding of the information communicated by ATSDR.
Step 5: Communicate Results, Findings, and Findings Along with Strategies to Avoid Exposures	ATSDR Health Assessment Process Overview Video	Short 6-minute video designed to explain what ATSDR is, what ATSDR's role is, and the health assessment process. The video is designed to help set expectations for the assessment process.
	PowerPoint and Message Mapping Tool	PowerPoint templates for use at community meetings and message maps to help health assessors develop messages specific to the community's situation.
	Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool	Worksheet to guide the ATSDR site team through the process of identifying and tracking contact information for key stakeholders and potential partners.
	Media Analysis Guide	Tips and pointers on how to do a quick media analysis in order to gather data about the site and help determine the level of concern in the community.
	Guide to Materials Development	Guidance on different types of materials that can be developed and how to apply emergency risk communication principles.
	Tips for Communicating Assessment Findings	Guidelines and tips for holding a successful community meeting and delivering information regarding the results of the assessment.
Stage 6: Closeout	Brief Community Survey	Same tool used in initial stage of data gathering. Use at this stage provides final data that can be compared to the baseline data.

Step	Tool	Description
	Event Evaluation Form	Tool for ATDR's use to assess how well ATSDR carried out outreach efforts at various events for the community
	Indicator Set Memo	A set of proposed process and outcome indicators to assess the site team's implementation of communication strategies encouraged by the toolkit, the community's perception of those efforts, and the community's understanding of the information communicated by ATSDR.

Applying Risk Communication Principles

The approach used in this toolkit incorporates risk and crisis communication principles. When an environmental contamination issue affects a community, it's not surprising that community members are concerned. The level of concern often varies widely between and within communities due to a wide range of factors, including whether a community has a history of environmental issues and socioeconomic factors. Understanding the level of concern and the nature of that concern is necessary to ensure that communication strategies, messages, and materials are appropriately tailored and that community members feel they are being heard.

Sometimes there is a mismatch between the level of concern and the actual risk that the environmental hazard poses to the community. For example, community members may be very upset about a hazard because they perceive that it is making children in the community ill, even though the risk the contaminant poses to the children is very low, and it is likely the source of the illness is another cause. These sorts of situations are particularly sensitive, so it is important to fully understand the nature of community members' concerns from the outset.

The Community Concern Assessment Tool and the Media Analysis Guide in this toolkit provide more guidance on how you can quickly take the pulse of the community to determine the level of concern and adjust your communication strategies appropriately. Below are two hypothetical scenarios in which a strategic communication process is implemented at two ends of the spectrum in an ATSDR public health assessment.

Sample Scenarios

The following scenarios are examples of how the items in this toolkit can be used in different types of communities (e.g., levels of concern, levels of risk, size, location). Of course, each community is different, so you will need to use your judgement to determine which tools that fit your situation.

Scenario 1 – Low Community Concern, Low Risk

ATSDR conducted a recent investigation in Anyville, a rural town located 40 miles away from Major City. The investigation site consisted of a wood treating shop which had disposed its wood-processing wastes in a cave from the 1950s until the early 1970s. The State detected PCBs in a few private wells in the area. As a first step, ATSDR public health assessors used the **Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool** to identify community leaders to involve in the assessment, completed a **Brief Community Survey** with a small group of community members, and completed a **Community Data worksheet** to confirm information they were able to obtain from the county government. Based on the survey, it appeared that besides the residents whose wells were contaminated, residents of Anyville were not terribly concerned. Next, ATSDR conducted a limited number of interviews with a couple of community-based organizations and additional community members (including those whose wells were affected), and subsequently completed the **Community Concern Assessment tool** that confirmed that there was a low level of overall concern in the community.

ATSDR invited residents living closest to the impacted area to an informal public meeting at one of the town's schools to introduce themselves and the assessment process through distributing flyers in mailboxes, posting a notice in the town's newspaper and posting notices at the town's public library. Prior to the meeting, ATSDR developed informational materials (fact sheets, advisories) in plain language about the health assessment process, the potential hazard of the site, and what residents can do to reduce possible health risks during the assessment period.

At the community meeting, ATSDR health assessors showed the **ATSDR Health Assessment Process Overview video**, discussed the health assessment at hand and answered any questions community members may have. Copies of ATSDR's informational materials were distributed at the meeting. ATSDR also publicized that they will keep the community apprised of their progress through a community listserv and Web blog.

As the assessment progressed, ATSDR posted activities each month that they conducted and what they plan to do for the upcoming month. Since the level of concern among community members remained low, and the health risk was confirmed to be low, at the end of their investigation ATSDR held a public meeting, distributed the assessment findings through the web site and posted updates of the investigation on the community's listserv. In preparation to close out their investigation, ATSDR conducted another **Brief Community Survey** to assess whether site close out efforts could proceed.

Scenario 2 – High Level of Concern, High Actual Risk

ATSDR recently conducted an investigation in Anytown, which has a chemical plant that has manufactured insecticides and herbicides since the 1940s. As a result of inadequate waste disposal methods and production controls, soil, surface water, and ground water were contaminated by insecticides, herbicides, chlorinated phenols, and dioxin. The community has experienced a high number of cancers, birth defects and respiratory illnesses among its residents compared to nearby towns of the same size. As more information about the health of community members was shared through social media, more and more community members blamed the chemical plant as the main cause of their health problems. Fear, anger and anxiety quickly built, and rumors about the government's impending response to the situation multiplied.



ATSDR needed to quickly and thoroughly assess the situation, which required completing some initial activities simultaneously. As a first step, ATSDR public health assessors reached out to community leaders, utilizing the **Stakeholder/Partner Outreach Tool**, completed a **Community Data Worksheet**, and investigated how the media had portrayed the situation by using the **Media Analysis Guide**. Next, ATSDR conducted numerous interviews with various stakeholders: community-based organizations, industry members and community members. Although ATSDR public health assessors were already aware that concerns among residents was elevated, they completed a **Community Concern Assessment Tool** to confirm and document the high level of concern.

Working with and through newly identified community stakeholder partners, ATSDR public health assessors identified an appropriate venue to hold its first public meeting (Anytown's high school auditorium), and channels by which to publicize the meeting (Anytown's local newspaper, local health department Facebook page and Twitter feed, flyers posted at community centers, libraries, grocery stores, and the post office). ATSDR used the **Message Mapping Tool** to script appropriate and informative messages for the initial meeting that incorporated risk communication principles. The public health assessors also used the **ATSDR-approved slide deck template** to develop a brief presentation that supplemented the **ATSDR video** to explain ATSDR's role, the health assessment process and the expectations residents can have from ATSDR's activities.

Leading up to the day of the meeting, the **Community Meeting Guidelines** were consulted to ensure that all information conveyed to community members would be understandable and clear, and that time was built in to listen to residents' concerns and answer questions. The **Guide to Materials Development** was also consulted to help ATSDR staff develop simple and actionable messages and materials to distribute on the day of the meeting.

On the day of the community meeting, ATSDR had fact sheets about ATSDR, FAQs about the health assessment process, basic factsheets on chlorinated phenols, dioxin, and commonly used herbicides and pesticides, and a fact sheet on what residents can do immediately to keep safe.

Throughout the health assessment process, ATSDR developed and disseminated regular updates on their progress, activities they were currently working on, and upcoming tasks they will initiate next. These updates were communicated through Twitter, an online newsletter (distributed by a listserv and through a specially-developed Web site for the site investigation), and through brief articles in the local newspaper. ATSDR also posted the fact sheets and other information that were disseminated at the community meeting on the Web site to ensure that everyone had information that was communicated at the initial meeting. ATSDR also had a booth at the town's health fair, county fair, and other town events as part of their ongoing outreach efforts to keep residents up to date on their investigation activities and progress.

At the conclusion of the assessment, ATSDR health assessors scheduled another public meeting to communicate its findings using the same communication channels as they did for the first meeting to announce the follow up meeting. Prior to the meeting, they consulted **Tips for Communicating Assessment Findings** to ensure they covered all the needed components for a successful meeting: drafting talking points of key findings in plain language, scheduling enough time to listen to residents' concerns, having answers ready for potential follow up questions from the audience, and developing fact sheets and health advisories that pertained to the health risks.



At this second meeting, ATSDR staff re-introduced the agency and site team before explaining the findings of the health assessment, using an abbreviated version of an **ATSDR PowerPoint** presentation. They took care to listen and address all questions residents had, encouraged residents to take informational materials, and told them that ATSDR would inform them when the full assessment report would be available online and at the repository.

In preparation to close-out the investigation, ATSDR conducted another **Brief Community Survey** to assess whether site close-out efforts could proceed, and distributed an **Event Evaluation** form to community leaders and residents at the end of the meeting to assess how well they carried out outreach and communication efforts about the site assessment.