

Exposure to Methyl Bromide on St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands

In March 2015, a family of four became seriously ill on St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands due to suspected indoor exposure to the toxic chemical methyl bromide in a resort housing unit. In addition to the family of four, multiple other people may have been exposed to this chemical. This fact sheet will explain how ATSDR is helping and what you need to know to keep your family safe.

What is methyl bromide?

Methyl bromide is a colorless chemical (gas or liquid) that is used to kill pests such as insects and rats, as well as fungi. It is generally sprayed in the soil, grain silos, and ship storage holds.

Methyl bromide is odorless at low concentrations. At very high concentrations, it has a sweet, fruity odor.

How could I come into contact with methyl bromide?

If you went into the resort units where the suspected exposures took place, or if you went into an adjoining unit, then you may have been exposed to methyl bromide. The most common way you may have come into contact with methyl bromide is by breathing it in.

Methyl bromide is more dangerous in high doses, especially if you breathe in large amounts. If you breathe air where it has recently been used to kill pests, you have a higher risk of being exposed and possibly having health problems.

What are the health effects of methyl bromide?

Exposure to Low Concentrations

If you breathe in low concentrations of methyl bromide, you may

- Get a headache
- Feel weak, tired, or nauseated
- Become confused

Exposure to High Concentrations

If you breathe in high concentrations of methyl bromide, you may

- Have muscle tremors and seizures
- Have trouble breathing (because it can irritate your lungs or cause fluids to build up in your lungs)
- Have kidney damage and nerve damage

People who breathe in very high amounts of methyl bromide can die.

For more detailed information about health effects, consult ATSDR's Medical Management Guideline for methyl bromide ([Link provided below](#)).

How is ATSDR helping?

The U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) Department of Health asked the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to come to St. John to assist with an epidemiologic investigation into these exposures. This investigation is also known as an Epi-Aid Investigation.

During the investigation, ATSDR staff and the USVI Department of Health will

- Identify people who might have been exposed to methyl bromide (such as residents, visitors, vacationers, employees of the condominium complex and other locations where this chemical was used, pesticide company employees, and emergency responders)
- Conduct interviews to determine exposure, symptoms and health effects, and medical care received
- Review medical charts of those receiving medical care following the exposure
- Provide information about methyl bromide to local medical providers and to the people who were potentially exposed

ATSDR is working closely with our partners at the USVI Department of Health and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency during this investigation.

How can I protect my family?

Most people don't need to take any special steps to avoid methyl bromide in their daily lives. If you are worried about methyl bromide—especially if you think you've been exposed where it has recently been used to kill pests—talk to your doctor.

You can also contact CDC/ATSDR to get advice and information

- Via phone: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)
- Via email: cdcinfoemail@cdc.gov

Where can I get more information?

If you are looking for more detailed information about methyl bromide, consult the following ATSDR resources.

- [Medical Management Guidelines for Methyl Bromide](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/MMG/MMG.asp?id=818&tid=160)
(<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/MMG/MMG.asp?id=818&tid=160>)
- [Toxicological Profile for Bromomethane](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/tp27.pdf) (another name for methyl bromide)
(<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/tp27.pdf>)
- [ToxFAQ on Bromomethane](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/tfacts27.pdf)
(<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/tfacts27.pdf>)