

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about xylene. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-800-232-4636. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. It is important you understand this information 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.

**HIGHLIGHTS:** Exposure to xylene occurs in the workplace and when you use paint, gasoline, paint thinners and other products that contain it. People who breathe high levels may have dizziness, confusion, and a change in their sense of balance. Xylene has been found in at least 840 of the 1,684 National Priority List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

## What is xylene?

There are three forms of xylene in which the methyl groups vary on the benzene ring: *meta*-xylene, *ortho*-xylene, and *para*-xylene (*m*-, *o*-, and *p*-xylene). These different forms are referred to as isomers.

Xylene is a colorless, sweet-smelling liquid that catches on fire easily. It occurs naturally in petroleum and coal tar. Chemical industries produce xylene from petroleum. It is one of the top 30 chemicals produced in the United States in terms of volume.

Xylene is used as a solvent and in the printing, rubber, and leather industries. It is also used as a cleaning agent, a thinner for paint, and in paints and varnishes. It is found in small amounts in airplane fuel and gasoline.

## What happens to xylene when it enters the environment?

- Xylene evaporates quickly from the soil and surface water into the air.
- In the air, it is broken down by sunlight into other less harmful chemicals in a couple of days.
- It is broken down by microorganisms in soil and water.
- Only a small amount of it builds up in fish, shellfish, plants, and other animals living in xylene-contaminated water.

## How might I be exposed to xylene?

- Using a variety of consumer products including gasoline, paint varnish, shellac, rust preventatives, and cigarette smoke. Xylene can be absorbed through the respiratory tract and through the skin.
- Ingesting xylene-contaminated food or water, although these levels are likely to be very low.
- Working in a job that involves the use of xylene such as painters, paint industry workers, biomedical laboratory workers, automobile garage workers, metal workers, and furniture refinishers.

## How can xylene affect my health?

No health effects have been noted at the background levels that people are exposed to on a daily basis.

High levels of exposure for short or long periods can cause headaches, lack of muscle coordination, dizziness, confusion, and changes in one's sense of balance. Exposure of people to high levels of xylene for short periods can also cause irritation of the skin, eyes, nose, and throat; difficulty in breathing; problems with the lungs; delayed reaction time; memory difficulties; stomach discomfort; and possibly changes in the liver and kidneys. It can cause unconsciousness and even death at very high levels.

ToxFAQs™ Internet address is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>

### How likely is xylene to cause cancer?

Both the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the EPA have found that there is insufficient information to determine whether or not xylene is carcinogenic.

### How can xylene affect children?

The effects of xylene have not been studied in children, but it is likely that they would be similar to those seen in exposed adults. Although there is no direct evidence, children may be more sensitive to acute inhalation exposure than adults because their narrower airways would be more sensitive to swelling effects.

Studies of unborn animals indicate that high concentrations of xylene may cause increased numbers of deaths, and delayed growth and development. In many instances, these same concentrations also cause damage to the mothers. We do not know if xylene harms the unborn child if the mother is exposed to low levels of xylene during pregnancy.

### How can families reduce the risks of exposure to xylene?

- Exposure to xylene as solvents (in paints or gasoline) can be reduced if the products are used with adequate ventilation and if they are stored in tightly closed containers out of the reach of small children.
- Sometimes older children sniff household chemicals in attempt to get high. Talk with your children about the dangers of sniffing xylene.
- If products containing xylene are spilled on the skin, then the excess should be wiped off and the area cleaned with soap and water.

### Is there a medical test to determine whether I've been exposed to xylene?

Laboratory tests can detect xylene or its breakdown products in exhaled air, blood, or urine. There is a high degree of agreement between the levels of exposure to xylene and the levels of xylene breakdown products in the urine. However, a urine sample must be provided very soon after exposure ends because xylene quickly leaves the body. These tests are not routinely available at your doctor's office because they require special equipment.

### Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA set a limit of 10 parts xylene per million parts drinking water (10 ppm).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set limits of 100 parts xylene per million parts of workplace air (100 ppm) for 8 hour shifts and 40 hour work weeks.

### References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2007. Toxicological Profile for Xylene (Update). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Public Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

**Where can I get more information?** For more information, contact the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Division of Toxicology and Environmental Medicine, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-800-232-4636, FAX: 770-488-4178. ToxFAQs Internet address via WWW is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>. ATSDR can tell you where to find occupational and environmental health clinics. Their specialists can recognize, evaluate, and treat illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances. You can also contact your community or state health or environmental quality department if you have any more questions or concerns.

