

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about xylene. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. It's 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.

**SUMMARY:** 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. This substance has been found in at least 658 of the 1,430 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

## What is xylene?

(Pronounced zī'lēn)

Xylene is a colorless, sweet-smelling liquid that catches on fire easily. It occurs naturally in petroleum and coal tar and is formed during forest fires. You can smell xylene in air at 0.08–3.7 parts of xylene per million parts of air (ppm) and begin to taste it in water at 0.53–1.8 ppm.

Chemical industries produce xylene from petroleum. It's 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 has been found in waste sites and landfills when discarded as used solvent, or in varnish, paint, or paint thinners.
- It 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.
- It is broken down by microorganisms in soil and water.
- Only a small amount of it builds up in fish, shellfish, plants, and animals living in xylene-contaminated water.

## How might I be exposed to xylene?

- Breathing xylene in workplace air or in automobile exhaust.
- Breathing contaminated air.
- Touching gasoline, paint, paint removers, varnish, shellac, and rust preventatives that contain it.
- Breathing cigarette smoke that has small amounts of xylene in it.
- Drinking contaminated water or breathing air near waste sites and landfills that contain xylene.
- The amount of xylene in food is likely to be low.

## How can xylene affect my health?

Xylene affects the brain. High levels from exposure for short periods (14 days or less) or long periods (more than 1 year) can cause headaches, lack of muscle coordination, dizziness, confusion, and changes in one's sense of balance. Exposure of

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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.

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 likely is xylene to cause cancer?

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that xylene is not classifiable as to its carcinogenicity in humans.

Human and animal studies have not shown xylene to be carcinogenic, but these studies are not conclusive and do not provide enough information to conclude that xylene does not cause cancer.

### Is there a medical test to show 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.

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

The EPA has set a limit of 10 ppm of xylene in drinking water.

The EPA requires that spills or accidental releases of xylenes into the environment of 1,000 pounds or more must be reported.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set a maximum level of 100 ppm xylene in workplace air for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) also recommend exposure limits of 100 ppm in workplace air.

NIOSH has recommended that 900 ppm of xylene be considered immediately dangerous to life or health. This is the exposure level of a chemical that is likely to cause permanent health problems or death.

### Glossary

Evaporate: To change from a liquid into a vapor or a gas.

Carcinogenic: Having the ability to cause cancer.

CAS: Chemical Abstracts Service.

ppm: Parts per million.

Solvent: A liquid that can dissolve other substances.

### References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1995. Toxicological profile for xylenes (update). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of 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, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-888-422-8737, 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.

