

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about selenium. 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 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: People may be exposed to low levels of selenium daily through food and water. Selenium is a trace mineral needed in small amounts for good health, but exposure to much higher levels can result in neurological effects and brittle hair and deformed nails. Occupational inhalation exposure to selenium vapors may cause dizziness, fatigue, irritation of mucous membranes, and respiratory effects. This substance has been found in at least 508 of the 1,636 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is selenium?

Selenium is a naturally occurring mineral element that is distributed widely in nature in most rocks and soils. In its pure form, it exists as metallic gray to black hexagonal crystals, but in nature it is usually combined with sulfide or with silver, copper, lead, and nickel minerals. Most processed selenium is used in the electronics industry, but it is also used: as a nutritional supplement; in the glass industry; as a component of pigments in plastics, paints, enamels, inks, and rubber; in the preparation of pharmaceuticals; as a nutritional feed additive for poultry and livestock; in pesticide formulations; in rubber production; as an ingredient in antidandruff shampoos; and as a constituent of fungicides. Radioactive selenium is used in diagnostic medicine.

What happens to selenium when it enters the environment?

- Selenium occurs naturally in the environment and can be released by both natural and manufacturing processes.
- Selenium dust can enter the air from burning coal and oil. This selenium dust will eventually settle over the land and water.
- It also enters water from rocks and soil, and from agricultural and industrial waste. Some selenium compounds will dissolve in water, and some will settle to the bottom as particles.

- Insoluble forms of selenium will remain in soil, but soluble forms are very mobile and may enter surface water from soils.

- Selenium may accumulate up the food chain.

How might I be exposed to selenium?

- The general population is exposed to very low levels of selenium in air, food, and water. The majority of the daily intake comes from food.
- People working in or living near industries where selenium is produced, processed, or converted into commercial products may be exposed to higher levels of selenium in the air.
- People living in the vicinity of hazardous waste sites or coal burning plants may also be exposed to higher levels of selenium.

How can selenium affect my health?

Selenium has both beneficial and harmful effects. Low doses of selenium are needed to maintain good health. However, exposure to high levels can cause adverse health effects. Short-term oral exposure to high concentrations of selenium may cause nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Chronic oral exposure to high concentrations of selenium compounds can produce a disease called selenosis. The major signs of selenosis are hair loss, nail brittleness, and neurological abnormalities (such as numbness and other odd sensations

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in the extremities).

Brief exposures to high levels of elemental selenium or selenium dioxide in air can result in respiratory tract irritation, bronchitis, difficulty breathing, and stomach pains. Longer-term exposure to either of these air-borne forms can cause respiratory irritation, bronchial spasms, and coughing. Levels of these forms of selenium that would be necessary to produce such effects are normally not seen outside of the workplace.

Animal studies have shown that very high amounts of selenium can affect sperm production and the female reproductive cycle. We do not know if similar effects would occur in humans.

How likely is selenium to cause cancer?

Studies of laboratory animals and people show that most selenium compounds probably do not cause cancer. In fact, studies in humans suggest that lower-than-normal selenium levels in the diet might increase the risk of cancer.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that selenium and selenium compounds are not classifiable as to their carcinogenicity to humans.

The EPA has determined that one specific form of selenium, selenium sulfide, is a probable human carcinogen. Selenium sulfide is not present in foods and is a very different chemical from the organic and inorganic selenium compounds found in foods and in the environment.

How can selenium affect children?

It is likely that the health effects seen in children exposed to selenium will be similar to the effects seen in adults.

However, one study found that children may be less susceptible to the health effects of selenium than adults. Selenium compounds have not been shown to cause birth defects in humans or in other mammals.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to selenium?

Certain dietary supplements and shampoos contain selenium; these should be used according to the

manufacturer's directions.

Children living near waste sites that contain selenium or coal burning plants should be encouraged to wash their hands before eating and to avoid putting their unwashed hands in their mouths.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to selenium?

Low levels of selenium are normally found in body tissues and urine. Blood and urine tests for selenium are most useful for people who have recently been exposed to high levels. Toenail clippings can be used to determine longer-term exposure. These tests are not usually available at your doctor's office, but your doctor can send the samples to a laboratory that can perform the tests. None of these tests, however, can predict whether you will experience any health effects.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA restricts the amount of selenium allowed in public water supplies to 50 parts total selenium per billion parts of water (50 ppb).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sets a limit of 0.2 mg selenium/m³ of workroom air for an 8-hour work shift.

ATSDR and the EPA have determined that 5 micrograms of selenium per kilogram of body weight taken daily would not be expected to cause any adverse health effects over a lifetime of such intake.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2003. Toxicological Profile for Selenium (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.

