



Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry

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Frequently Asked Questions About ATSDR

What is the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)?

ATSDR is the principal federal public health agency involved with hazardous waste issues. The agency helps prevent or reduce the harmful effects of exposure to hazardous substances on human health. ATSDR, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, was created by the Superfund Law in 1980.

Where is ATSDR located? How big is it?

ATSDR's headquarters are in Atlanta, Georgia. The agency has 10 regional offices and an office in Washington D.C. Hundreds of multi-disciplinary staff include epidemiologists, physicians, toxicologists, engineers, public health educators, health communication specialists, and support staff.

What does ATSDR do?

ATSDR conducts a number of activities to help prevent or reduce the harmful effects of exposure to hazardous substances, including:

- Advises federal and state agencies, community members, and other interested parties on the health impacts of Superfund sites and other petitioned sites.
- Identifies communities where people might be exposed to hazardous substances in the environment.
- Determines the level of public health hazard posed by a site.
- Recommends actions that need to be taken to safeguard people's health.
- Conducts health studies in some communities that are located near Superfund sites or in locations where people have been exposed to toxic materials.
- Funds research conducted by colleges, state agencies, and others who study the relationship between hazardous waste exposure and illnesses.
- Educates physicians, other health care professionals, and community members about the health effects of—and how to lessen exposure to—hazardous substances.
- Provides technical support and advice to other federal agencies and state and local governments.
- Maintains the National ALS Registry, a congressionally mandated registry for persons in the U.S. with ALS. It is the only population-based registry in the U.S. that collects information to help scientists learn more about who gets ALS and its causes.

What can ATSDR do to help a community that may be exposed to hazardous substances?

ATSDR helps communities in a variety of ways, including:

- Helps communities by working with them to resolve their health concerns.
- Determines whether the community is or was exposed to hazardous substances.
- Visits the community to hear residents voice their health concerns.
- Educates residents about any health hazards posed by environmental contaminants.
- Works with local health care providers to ensure they have the information needed to evaluate possible exposures to hazardous substances in their community.

- Visits a community to draw blood or to collect urine to determine if people have been or are being exposed to a hazardous substance when such actions are required.
- Can provide medical monitoring in communities exposed to hazardous substances if such action is needed.

What can't ATSDR do to help a community?

ATSDR does not have the legal authority to conduct certain activities, such as the following:

- Cannot provide medical care or treatment to people who have been exposed to hazardous substances, even if the exposure has made them ill.
- Cannot provide funds to relocate affected residents or to clean up a site.
- Cannot close down a plant or other business, but can make recommendations to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

How is ATSDR's role in helping communities different from EPA's role?

Unlike EPA, ATSDR is not a regulatory agency. ATSDR is a public health agency that advises EPA on the health aspects of hazardous waste sites or spills. ATSDR makes recommendations to EPA when specific actions are needed to protect the public's health. For example, ATSDR might recommend providing an alternative water supply, removing contaminated material, or restricting access to a site. EPA usually follows these recommendations. However, ATSDR cannot require EPA to follow its recommendations.

How does ATSDR become involved with a site? How can I get ATSDR involved with a site?

ATSDR is required by the Superfund law to become involved with all sites that are on or proposed for the National Priorities List (NPL). Specifically, ATSDR conducts public health assessments of NPL sites, as well as of all sites proposed for the NPL. EPA, states, local governments, or other federal agencies may request ATSDR's help with a site, such as in cases of accidental spills or releases. Anyone may request or "petition" that ATSDR to do a health consultation. Most requests for health consultations come from EPA and state and local agencies. Anyone may also petition ATSDR to conduct a public health assessment of a site. For more information about how to petition ATSDR to conduct a public health assessment, visit <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/hac/petitionatsdrdchi.html>, or call toll-free 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636); TTY" (888)232-6348.

How does ATSDR work with states and local health departments?

ATSDR has cooperative agreements (partnerships) with 28 states to conduct site-related public health assessments or health consultations, health studies, and health education. In states that have cooperative agreements, ATSDR provides technical assistance and oversees site evaluations and related activities done by state staff. ATSDR also assists local health departments.

Does ATSDR assist communities located near hazardous waste sites that are not on the NPL?

Yes. More than half of the sites ATSDR has worked at are not on the NPL.

What information does ATSDR provide through its Internet web site?

Information that can be accessed through ATSDR's web site includes these items: information about ATSDR; a database containing information on all sites where ATSDR has worked; short, easy-to-read fact sheets on 60 of the most common contaminants at Superfund sites; and links to related sites.

Chemical Exposure and Health Effects

Are you able to tell me the potential danger regarding a chemical substance to which I have been exposed?


Yes. ATSDR's mission is to prevent exposure and adverse human health effects and diminished quality of life associated with exposure to hazardous substances from waste sites, unplanned releases, and other sources of pollution present in the environment. The agency employs personnel with toxicologic, epidemiologic, and other specialized expertise who can assess

the hazards posed by chemical substances.

Is my family, especially my children, in any potential danger by living near a chemical manufacturing company?



The ability to answer this question depends on the material released in the environment, whether people might be exposed to it, and what harm exposure can potentially cause. An important part of determining whether a hazard exists is to meet with members of the community to hear health concerns that may be related to environmental exposures. ATSDR has been able to reassure some communities that people near chemical plants were not being exposed to hazardous substances. And, in other cases, after determining that some people were being exposed to hazardous substances, our agency has been able to advise communities about how to reduce their exposure.

What am I required to do when property owners next door, ex-employers, competitors, etc., have discarded objectionable waste on their property that has contaminated the groundwater and air? What if reports of alleged illegal or offensive releases or dumping have been ignored by local authorities?

Check with your local authorities (city, county) first. State agencies are also typically authorized to operate programs for clean air, groundwater, and solid waste. Regional EPA offices will have information about current Superfund investigations and potential new ones. Contact the regional EPA offices to report alleged illegal or offensive releases or dumping in cases where local authorities or state agencies have not responded. You can find web site/contact information on EPA's regional offices at: <https://www.epa.gov/aboutepa/epa-organization-chart#regional> 

Chemical Information

How can I obtain the Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for a particular compound of interest?

Contact the product manufacturer for a specific MSDS. Many of these sheets are also available on the Internet. Some helpful sites are the Cornell University Internet web page at: <http://www.ehs.cornell.edu/msds/msds.cfm>  and the Vermont Site at: <http://hazard.com/msds/> 

What substance is considered to be the most toxic?

This is a very difficult, if not impossible, question to answer. Several factors need to be considered when discussing toxicity. These include the route of exposure, i.e., skin, inhalation, ingestion, etc., the duration of exposure, how much of the substance you were exposed to, and a number of other factors. ATSDR can provide you with a list of chemicals most frequently found at Superfund sites as well as documents explaining how the ranking is determined.

Disposal of Chemicals

Where may I dispose of my household wastes, solvents, paints, and paint cans?

Check with your local authorities (town, county, state) for directions on how to correctly dispose of household wastes, solvents, paints, and paint cans.

How do I dispose of ammonia properly?

Check with your local authorities (town, county, state, and/or regional).

How do I dispose of paint stripper properly?

Check with your local authorities (town, county, state, and/or regional).

How do I dispose of biodegradable diapers and beverage cans/bottles properly?

Check with your local authorities (town, county, state, and/or regional). You may also need to check your city's waste management program.

Contacting ATSDR

How can I report a site that may be contaminated near my home?

By contacting ATSDR, we can direct you to the appropriate division in our agency. ATSDR has cooperative agreements (partnerships) with 28 states to conduct site-related public health assessments or health consultations.

Does your agency have a toxicologist available during an emergency situation?

Yes, we have an emergency response team on duty everyday to provide technical assistance on health-related situations.

Is ATSDR like a poison control center?

In certain aspects we are similar, but we are more diverse in our mission for community health. We have toxicologists and other health specialists on technical telephone duty everyday, and an emergency response team to provide technical assistance for health-related problems caused by toxic chemical spills or releases of hazardous substances.

Can ATSDR help me in locating physicians that deal with illnesses related to chemical exposure?

The ATSDR Information Center refers individuals to member clinics of the Association of Occupational and Environmental Clinics (AOEC). Staff at these clinics are medical doctors that specialize in treating illnesses caused by chemical exposure. By [contacting ATSDR](#) you can request the clinic closest to you.

Can ATSDR assist me with more referrals to different hotline numbers?

Yes, ATSDR assists the public in locating health-related information as a community service. Our resource list of toll-free numbers contains thousands of biomedical information resources including organizations, databases, research institutions, and the like. Our list of hotlines includes a variety of groups disseminating information on a number of health-related concerns.

Does ATSDR have facilities that are able to test samples possibly contaminated with hazardous substances?

ATSDR does not have these types of facilities; however, we may be able to assist you in finding facilities that are able to conduct these tests.

What is a Superfund site?

Superfund is the name commonly given to the most hazardous wastesites found around the country. ATSDR is responsible for protecting the public from adverse health effects associated with exposure to hazardous substances found at these Superfund sites as well as other sources of pollution in the environment, such as emergency response sites.