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Environmental Odors Web Site: Providing Communities and Health Officials With the Tools to Address Odor Issues

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Environmental odor concerns are commonly reported to environmental health units at the local and state levels. Many U.S. Environmental Protection Agency program sites (Superfund and Resource Conservation and Recovery Act) and approximately 25% of Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) petition requests involve an odor concern component (e.g., industries, landfills, and confined animal feeding operations [CAFOs]). Increasing numbers of scientific studies are finding associations between environmental odors and health effects. Despite this need for information on environmental odors, no comprehensive electronic source or Web site existed that covered this topic and provided resources for the many parties that face environmental odor issues. Assessing the possible health impacts of odors is also complex. Even if the chemical or chemical mixture is identified, little to no regulations exist at the state and local levels. The lack of an effective odor response framework makes odor problems difficult to resolve.

In an effort to improve this situation, ATSDR collaborated with the National Center for Environmental Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop a comprehensive Web site that provides communities, health care providers, policy makers, health officials, municipalities, industries, and other stakeholders with actionable steps to deal with environmental odors in their communities.

Environmental odors can come from a variety of sources and affect communities across the nation. For example, animal activities may contribute to odors through manure or CAFOs; human activities can contribute to odors through compost and landfills; vehicles can cause odors through diesel and exhaust; natural odors can be found with fires and stagnant ponds; and industries may contribute to odors during manufacturing, processing, waste treatment, and unplanned releases. The ATSDR odors Web site, located at www.atsdr.cdc.gov/odors/, addresses common questions about environmental odors and their effects on health and offers additional information about odors, including the following:

- approaches for reducing environmental odors in communities,
- steps for reporting environmental odor problems to state and local health departments
- methods for conducting odor complaint investigations, and

- ways for involving community members and other stakeholders in odor management decisions.

In addition, regulatory approaches to odor and compliance and enforcement tools are available for communities and officials who seek long-term solutions to odor issues. A search tool on the home page of the Web site (Figure 1) helps users identify a particular odor or chemical simply by typing in information about the odor, such as a description of its smell.

The Web site also contains interactive PowerPoint presentations (under the “Getting Involved” section in Figure 2) that contain easy-to-understand information on symptoms related to odor exposure, odor controls, odor diaries (used to document information about environmental odors), and other related issues. While this information may be useful to groups such as health care providers and community residents, the Web site also provides a collection of resources for government agencies, officials, and industries. For example, the “Odor Investigations” page contains information on how to conduct an odor complaint investigation and identify a nuisance odor.

In 2015, ATSDR plans to add a new search tool containing typical odor-onset levels (odor thresholds), occupational limits, minimal risk levels, target organs, chemical uses, and industries commonly associated with certain chemicals. Additionally, information will be available on existing state and local regulations regarding odors.

To evaluate the utility of the Web site, ATSDR asked members of the National Association of County and City Health Officials’ Environmental Health Committee, the Water Environment Research Foundation, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials’ State Environmental Health Directors Group, and officials with various state and local health departments for feedback. Overall, the reviewers found the Web site to be user friendly, logically organized, and a powerful resource for community advocacy, patient care, education, and policy decisions. Reviewers also cited the Web site as a useful tool for building trust by encouraging people with odor concerns to become involved in solving odor issues. Reviewers also shared useful comments to improve the Web site.

Issues surrounding environmental odors are multifaceted and can be difficult to address. The ATSDR Web site seeks to ease the challenges of the odor response process by providing information and ideas for addressing odors. We invite readers of this column to visit the Web site and to submit comments for further improvements.

Acknowledgement

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ATSDR Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry

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Environmental Odors

Environmental Odors come from human activities, animals, nature, vehicles, and industry. Here we provide answers to common questions on odors and health... (Continue =>)

FAQs
Frequently Asked Questions

Replay

Odors

Odor Symptoms

FAQs

GO

Text size: S M L XL

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Contact Us:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
4770 Buford Hwy NE
Atlanta, GA 30341

800-CDC-INFO
(800-232-4636)
TTY:
(888) 232-6348
Contact CDC-INFO

New Hours of Operation
8am-8pm ET/Monday-Friday
Closed Holidays

Popular Topics

- What Is that Odor?
- Odor Diaries
- [Odor Complaint Investigations](#)
- Odor Onset Levels (Thresholds)
- How to Take an Environmental Exposure History?

Search Odors

Resources by Topic

General Information
What is that Odor?, Will the odor make me sick?

Odor Control
Reducing Odors, Suggestions, Prevention, Preferred Methods

Getting Involved
Getting Involved (slide presentation), Odor Diaries

Resources for Health Care Providers
Environmental Odors and the Physiology of the Sense of Smell, Environmental Exposure History, ATSDR Exposure History Form, Case Studies in Environmental Medicine

Odor Investigations
Odor Complaint Investigations, Odor Onset Levels (Thresholds)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
Find answers such as "Will the Odor Make Me Sick?" and other FAQs

FIGURE 1. Screenshot of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry Environmental Odors Web Site Home Page

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The screenshot shows the ATSDR Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry website. The main heading is "Environmental Odors" with a sub-heading "Getting Involved". The page includes a search bar, a navigation menu, and a sidebar with contact information. The main content area contains text about getting involved, a group photo of diverse people, and a link to a PDF presentation titled "Presentation: Get Involved - Reduce Environmental Odors in your Community".

Environmental Odors

General Information

Getting Involved

Air Pollution Odor Diaries

Resources Health Care Providers

Odor Investigations

Odor Control

Frequently Asked Questions

Search Odors

Glossary

Submit Suggestions

environmentalodors@cdc.gov

Environmental Odors

Getting Involved

Members of communities affected by environmental odors do not have to feel helpless because of the odors; you can take action to improve the situation.

First, you may find it helpful to choose leaders that can represent your community and listen and speak on your behalf. In representing your community, these leaders may have several options for trying to resolve odor issues.

Your community leaders can request meetings with city government representatives, such as members of the city council or the mayor or the county board of health. Such a meeting may offer the opportunity to share the community's concerns, including talking with them about odors in your area and about people's symptoms, and the results of an odor diary. Your leaders can ask for their support in coming up with solutions, and you can share with them some of the solutions we talk about on this website.

Your community leaders can also meet with leaders from the facility(s) emitting the odors. You may find it helpful to approach them as partners and invite them to help resolve the odor issues.

Presentation: Get Involved - Reduce Environmental Odors in your Community

[PDF - 971 KB]

This presentation discusses odor sources, symptoms related to odor exposure, odor diaries, odor controls, and other related issues.

Odor Diaries

Odor diaries help document important information related to environmental odors. Odor diaries are easy to use and can produce useful information in as little as 2 weeks.

Contact Us:

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(800-232-4636)

TTY:
(888) 232-6348

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FIGURE 2.
Screenshot of the "Getting Involved" Section of the Odors Web Site