ATSDR
AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES AND DISEASE REGISTRY

Di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP)

CAS # 117-81-7

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP). 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: Di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP) is found in many plastics. Exposure to DEHP is generally very low. Increased exposures may come from intravenous fluids delivered through plastic tubing, and from ingesting contaminated foods or water. DEHP is not toxic at the low levels usually present in the environment. In animals, high levels of DEHP damaged the liver and kidney and affected the ability to reproduce. DEHP has been found in at least 733 of the 1,613 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is di(2-ethylhexyl) phthlate?

Di(2-ethylhexyl) phthlate (DEHP) is a manufactured chemical that is commonly added to plastics to make them flexible. DEHP is a colorless liquid with almost no odor.

DEHP is present in plastic products such as wall coverings, tablecloths, floor tiles, furniture upholstery, shower curtains, garden hoses, swimming pool liners, rainwear, baby pants, dolls, some toys, shoes, automobile upholstery and tops, packaging film and sheets, sheathing for wire and cable, medical tubing, and blood storage bags.

What happens to DEHP when it enters the environment?

❏ DEHP is everywhere in the environment because of its use in plastics, but it does not evaporate easily or dissolve in water easily.
❏ DEHP can be released in small amounts to indoor air from plastic materials, coatings, and flooring.
❏ It dissolves faster in water if gas, oil, or paint removers are present.
❏ It attaches strongly to soil particles.
❏ DEHP in soil or water can be broken down by microorganisms into harmless compounds.
❏ DEHP does not break down easily when it is deep in the soil or at the bottom of lakes or rivers.
❏ It is in plants, fish, and other animals, but animals high on the food chain are able to break down DEHP, so tissue levels are usually low.

How might I be exposed to DEHP?

DEHP is usually present at very low levels in:
❏ Medical products packaged in plastic such as blood products.
❏ Some foods packaged in plastics, especially fatty foods like milk products, fish or seafood, and oils.
❏ Well water near waste sites.
❏ Workplace air or indoor air where DEHP is released, but usually not at levels of concern.
❏ Fluids from plastic intravenous tubing if used extensively as for kidney dialysis.

How can DEHP affect my health?

At the levels found in the environment, DEHP is not expected to cause harmful health effects in humans. Most of what we know about the health effects of DEHP comes from studies of rats and mice given high amounts of DEHP.

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Harmful effects in animals generally occurred only with high amounts of DEHP or with prolonged exposures. Moreover, absorption and breakdown of DEHP in humans is different than in rats or mice, so the effects seen in rats and mice may not occur in humans.

Rats that breathed DEHP in the air showed no serious harmful effects. Their lifespan and ability to reproduce were not affected.

Brief oral exposure to very high levels of DEHP damaged sperm in mice. Although the effect reversed when exposure ceased, sexual maturity was delayed in the animals.

High amounts of DEHP damaged the liver of rats and mice. Whether or not DEHP contributes to human kidney damage is unclear.

Skin contact with products containing DEHP will probably cause no harmful effects because it cannot be taken up easily through the skin.

How likely is DEHP to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that DEHP may reasonably be anticipated to be a human carcinogen. The EPA has determined that DEHP is a probable human carcinogen. These determinations were based entirely on liver cancer in rats and mice. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has stated that DEHP cannot be classified as to its carcinogenicity to humans.

How can DEHP affect children?

Children can be exposed to DEHP in the same manner as adults. In addition, small children can be exposed by sucking on or skin contact with plastic toys and pacifiers that contain DEHP, but there is no conclusive evidence of adverse health effects after such exposures. Nonetheless, because of concern for children's health, many toy manufacturers have discontinued use of DEHP in their products. In pregnant rats and mice exposed to high amounts of DEHP, researchers observed birth defects and fetal deaths.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to DEHP?

❑ It is almost impossible to completely avoid contact with some DEHP because it is commonly found in plastics.
❑ Prevent babies and small children from chewing on plastic objects not designed for that purpose.

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

There is a test available that measures a breakdown product of DEHP called mono(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (MEHP) in your urine or blood. This test can only detect recent exposure because DEHP is rapidly broken down and eliminated from your body. This test is not routinely available at the doctor's office because it requires special equipment.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA limits the amount of DEHP that may be present in drinking water to 6 parts of DEHP per billion parts of water (6 ppb).

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sets a maximum average of 5 milligrams of DEHP per cubic meter of air (5 mg/m^3) in the workplace during an 8-hour shift. The short-term (15-minute) exposure limit is 10 mg/m^3.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2002. Toxicological Profile for Di(2-ethylhexyl) phthlate (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.