

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON TRICHLOROETHENE (TCE) IN INDOOR AND OUTDOOR AIR¹

Trichloroethene (TCE)

Trichloroethene (also known as trichloroethylene or TCE) is a human-made chemical. It is volatile, meaning it readily evaporates at room temperature into the air, where you can sometimes smell it. It is used as a solvent to remove grease from metal, a paint stripper, an adhesive solvent, an ingredient in paints and varnishes, and in the manufacture of other chemicals and products (for example, furniture and electric/electronic equipment).

Exposure to TCE

People may be exposed to TCE in air, water, and food, or when TCE or material containing TCE (for example, soil) gets on the skin. For most people, almost all TCE exposure is from indoor air.

Sources of TCE in Air

TCE may get into indoor air when TCE-containing products (for example, glues, adhesives, paint removers, spot removers, and metal cleaners) are used. Another source could be evaporation from contaminated well water that is used for household purposes. TCE may enter homes through soil vapor intrusion, which occurs when TCE evaporates from contaminated groundwater, enters soil vapor (air spaces between soil particles), and migrates through cracks or other openings in the foundation and into the building. TCE gets into outdoor air when it is released from industrial facilities and when it evaporates from areas where chemical wastes are stored or disposed.

Levels Typically Found in Air

The background indoor air levels of TCE in homes and office buildings not near known environmental sources of TCE are almost always 1 microgram per cubic meter of air (1 mcg/m³) or less. Background outdoor air levels also are almost always 1 mcg/m³ or less.

Health Risks Associated with Exposure to TCE

Most people, if exposed to TCE, are exposed to air levels much lower than those known to cause health effects in humans (for example, workplace air levels 90,000 to 800,000 mcg/m³). TCE exposure can cause effects on the central nervous system, liver, kidneys, and immune system of humans. TCE exposure is

¹ For a more technical discussion of this information, see the fact sheet “Trichloroethene (TCE) In Indoor and Outdoor Air” available at <http://www.health.ny.gov/environmental/chemicals/trichloroethene/>.

associated with reproductive effects in men and women, and may affect fetal development during pregnancy. However, the studies suggest, but do not prove, that the reproductive and developmental effects were caused by TCE, and not by some other factor. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) classifies TCE as a chemical that causes cancer in humans by all routes of exposure. Whether a person experiences a health effect depends on how much of the chemical he or she is exposed to, how often the exposure occurs, and how long the exposures last. Individual characteristics such as age, health, lifestyle, and genetics also play a role.

The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) Guideline for TCE in Air

NYSDOH recommends that TCE levels in air not exceed 2 mcg/m³. This replaces the previous guideline of 5 mcg/m³. The guideline was set at an air level that is lower than levels known to cause, or suspected of causing, health effects in humans, including sensitive populations (for example, children, pregnant women) and animals. The guideline is based on the assumption that people are continuously exposed to TCE in air all day, every day for months or as long as a lifetime. Continuous exposure is rarely true for most people, who, if exposed, are more likely to be exposed for a part of the day, part of a week, or part of their lifetime.

The guideline is used to help guide decisions regarding the urgency of efforts to reduce TCE exposure. At TCE air levels above the guideline, the higher the level, the greater the urgency to take action to reduce exposure. But as with any chemical in indoor air, the NYSDOH always recommends taking action to reduce exposure when the air concentration of a chemical is above background, even if it is below the guideline.

Indoor air concentrations substantially above the guideline clearly indicate a significant TCE source and the need for action to reduce exposure. In particular, NYSDOH has concerns about exposure during pregnancy, particularly during the first trimester, to air concentrations higher than 20 mcg/m³ because the major steps of heart development occur during this period and TCE may be a risk factor for fetal heart defects in humans. Thus, NYSDOH recommends taking immediate and effective action to reduce exposure when an air concentration is equal to, or above 20 mcg/m³. In all cases, the specific recommended action depends on a case-by-case evaluation of the situation.

Concerns about Exposure to TCE

Most people, if exposed to TCE, are exposed to air levels much lower than those known to cause health effects in humans. However, if you are concerned that you, your children, or others have been exposed to TCE, discuss your symptoms/signs with your health care provider. There are special tests to measure TCE and related chemicals in your blood, breath, or urine, and your health care provider can compare the results to those of people without known exposure to TCE or to workers with high exposure to TCE.

Questions

If you have any questions about the information in this fact sheet, would like to know more about TCE, or are concerned that you may be exposed to elevated levels of TCE, please call the New York State Department of Health at 1-518-402-7800 or 1-800-458-1158, send an e-mail to btsa@health.ny.gov, or write to the following address.

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