

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH). 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's 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: TPH is a mixture of many different compounds. Everyone is exposed to TPH from many sources, including gasoline pumps, spilled oil on pavement, and chemicals used at home or work. Some TPH compounds can affect your nervous system, causing headaches and dizziness. TPH has been found in at least 23 of the 1,467 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What are total petroleum hydrocarbons?

(Pronounced tōt'l pə-trō'lē-əm hī'drə-kär'bənz)

Total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) is a term used to describe a large family of several hundred chemical compounds that originally come from crude oil. Crude oil is used to make petroleum products, which can contaminate the environment. Because there are so many different chemicals in crude oil and in other petroleum products, it is not practical to measure each one separately. However, it is useful to measure the total amount of TPH at a site.

TPH is a mixture of chemicals, but they are all made mainly from hydrogen and carbon, called hydrocarbons. Scientists divide TPH into groups of petroleum hydrocarbons that act alike in soil or water. These groups are called petroleum hydrocarbon fractions. Each fraction contains many individual chemicals.

Some chemicals that may be found in TPH are hexane, jet fuels, mineral oils, benzene, toluene, xylenes, naphthalene, and fluorene, as well as other petroleum products and gasoline components. However, it is likely that samples of TPH will contain only some, or a mixture, of these chemicals.

What happens to TPH when it enters the environment?

- TPH may enter the environment through accidents, from industrial releases, or as byproducts from commercial or private uses.
- TPH may be released directly into water through spills or leaks.
- Some TPH fractions will float on the water and form surface films.
- Other TPH fractions will sink to the bottom sediments.
- Bacteria and microorganisms in the water may break down some of the TPH fractions.
- Some TPH fractions will move into the soil where they may stay for a long time.

How might I be exposed to TPH?

- Everyone is exposed to TPH from many sources.
- Breathing air at gasoline stations, using chemicals at home or work, or using certain pesticides.
- Drinking water contaminated with TPH.
- Working in occupations that use petroleum products.
- Living in an area near a spill or leak of petroleum products.
- Touching soil contaminated with TPH.

ToxFAQs Internet address via WWW is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>

How can TPH affect my health?

Some of the TPH compounds can affect your central nervous system. One compound can cause headaches and dizziness at high levels in the air. Another compound can cause a nerve disorder called "peripheral neuropathy," consisting of numbness in the feet and legs. Other TPH compounds can cause effects on the blood, immune system, lungs, skin, and eyes.

Animal studies have shown effects on the lungs, central nervous system, liver, and kidney from exposure to TPH compounds. Some TPH compounds have also been shown to affect reproduction and the developing fetus in animals.

How likely is TPH to cause cancer?

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that one TPH compound (benzene) is carcinogenic to humans. IARC has determined that other TPH compounds (benzo[a]pyrene and gasoline) are probably and possibly carcinogenic to humans. Most of the other TPH compounds are considered not to be classifiable by IARC.

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

There is no medical test that shows if you have been exposed to TPH. However, there are methods to determine if you have been exposed to some TPH compounds. Exposure to kerosene can be determined by its smell on the breath or clothing. Benzene can be measured in exhaled air and a breakdown product of benzene can be measured in urine. Other TPH compounds can be measured in blood, urine, breath, and some body tissues.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

There are no regulations or advisories specific to TPH. The following are recommendations for some of the TPH fractions and compounds:

The EPA requires that spills or accidental releases into the environment of 10 pounds or more of benzene be reported to the EPA.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has set an exposure limit of 500 parts of petroleum distillates per million parts of air (500 ppm) for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

Glossary

Carcinogenicity: Ability to cause cancer.

CAS: Chemical Abstracts Service.

Immune system: Body organs and cells that fight disease.

Pesticides: Chemicals used to kill pests.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1999. Toxicological profile for total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH). 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 E-29, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-888-422-8737, FAX: 404-498-0093. 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.

