



Southwest Center Pediatric Environmental Health

Formaldehyde Health Facts for Patients

What is formaldehyde?

- A colorless, flammable, strong smelling gas with a pungent odor found in many products such as glue, wood, upholstery, insulation, and particle board

How are people exposed to formaldehyde?

- From breathing the indoor air around new carpet, glues, paneling, furniture, and other products, particularly in new trailers
- From tobacco smoke
- From breathing in general, because formaldehyde is normally present to some degree in indoor and outdoor air

What are the short term health effects of formaldehyde?

Health effects are variable, depending on the individual and the concentration of formaldehyde in the air.

- 0.1 parts per million (ppm) in air: detectable odor
- 0.1 – 1 ppm: eye, nose, and throat irritation in sensitive people
- 1-10 ppm: burning sensation in the eyes, nose, and throat; cough
- Over 10 ppm: VERY strong odor and generally not tolerated

These effects are not unique to formaldehyde and could be caused by any number of chemicals.

What are the long term health effects of formaldehyde?

- People may develop an allergic reaction to formaldehyde over time, causing severe eye, nose, throat, and skin reactions or difficulty breathing at a lower air concentration than usual.
- It is unknown whether formaldehyde causes cancer in humans, but it does cause cancer of the nose and throat in laboratory animals with sustained exposure.

Should I get tested for formaldehyde exposure?

- There is no test for formaldehyde levels in the body.
- It is possible to test for skin allergies to formaldehyde.

Should I get air testing for formaldehyde in my home?

- There is no need to get air testing for your medical care. Air levels can be useful in studying multiple homes and residents. This means little for individual residents, however, because individual people have very different sensitivities to chemicals.