



# Chloroform

## Answers to Frequently Asked Health Questions

### What is chloroform?

Chloroform, also called trichloromethane or methyltrichloride, is a colorless liquid with a pleasant, non-irritating odor and a slightly sweet taste. As a volatile organic compound (VOC), chloroform easily vaporizes (turns into a gas) in the air. Chloroform does not easily burn, but it will burn when it reaches very high temperatures. Chloroform was one of the first inhaled anesthetics to be used during surgery, but it is not used as an anesthesia today.

### Where do you find chloroform?

In order to destroy the harmful bacteria found in our drinking water and waste waters, the chemical chlorine is added to these water sources. As a by-product of adding chlorine to our drinking and waste waters, small amounts of chloroform are formed. So small amounts of chloroform are likely to be found almost everywhere.

In industry, nearly all the chloroform made in the U.S. is used to make other chemicals. From the factories that make or use this chemical, chloroform can enter the air directly or it can enter the air from the evaporation (changing from liquid to a gas) of chloroform-contaminated waters and soils. Chloroform can also enter the water and soils from industry storage and waste sites spills and leaks.

Not only does chloroform evaporate very quickly when exposed to air, it also dissolves easily in water and does not stick to the soils very well. This means chloroform can easily travel through the soils to groundwater, where it can enter a water supply. Chloroform lasts a long time in both the air and in groundwater. Most of the chloroform in the air eventually breaks down, but it is a slow process. Chloroform does not appear to build up in great amounts in plants and animals, but we may find some small amounts of chloroform in foods.

### How do you come in contact with chloroform? Who is more at risk?

You are most likely to be exposed to chloroform by drinking contaminated water and/or by breathing contaminated indoor or outdoor air. Chloroform is found in nearly all public drinking water supplies. Chloroform is also found in the air from all areas of the United States. You are probably exposed to small amounts of chloroform in your drinking water and/or in beverages that are made using water that contains chloroform.

People who are at greater risk to be exposed to chloroform at higher-than-normal levels are people who work at or near chemical plants and factories that make or use chloroform. Higher exposures might occur in workers at drinking water treatment plants, waste water treatment plants, and paper and pulp mills. People who operate waste-burning equipment may also be exposed to higher than normal levels. People who swim a lot in swimming pools may also be exposed to higher levels.

### How does chloroform enter and leave your body?

- Chloroform can enter your body if you breathe contaminated air (inhalation)
- Chloroform can enter your body if you eat/drink contaminated food or water (ingestion)
- Chloroform can also enter your body through the skin (dermal).



If you take a bath, shower or swim in a pool with chloroform-contaminated water, it can enter your body through inhalation and dermal contact.

Studies in humans and animals show that after you breathe contaminated air or eat contaminated food, the chloroform can quickly enter your bloodstream from your lungs and intestines. Inside your body, chloroform is carried by the blood to all parts of your body, such as the liver, kidneys and fat cells.

Some of the chloroform that enters your body leaves unchanged in the air you breathe out and some of it is broken down into other chemicals. These chemicals are known as breakdown products or metabolites, and some of them can attach to other chemicals inside the cells of your body and may cause harmful effects if they collect in high enough amounts in your body. Some of the metabolites will leave the body in the air you breathe out and small amounts of the breakdown products leave the body in the urine and stool.

### How does chloroform affect health?

In humans, large amounts of chloroform can affect the central nervous system (brain), liver and kidneys. Breathing high levels for a short time can cause fatigue, dizziness, and headache. If you breathe air, eat food, or drink water containing elevated levels of chloroform, over a long period, the chloroform may damage your liver and kidneys. Large amounts of chloroform can cause sores (lesions) when the chloroform touches your skin.

Lab studies have shown chloroform caused reproductive problems in animals (mice and rats). However, there is no evidence that show whether chloroform causes harmful reproductive effects or birth defects in humans.

## Does chloroform cause cancer?

Based on animal studies, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that chloroform may reasonably be anticipated to be a carcinogen (a substance that causes cancer). The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that chloroform is possibly carcinogenic to humans (2B). The EPA has also determined that chloroform is a "probable" human carcinogen.

Results of studies of people who drank chlorinated water showed a possible link between the chloroform in the chlorinated water and the occurrence of cancer of the colon and urinary bladder. Rats and mice that ate food or drank water that had large amounts of chloroform in it for a long period of time developed cancer of the liver and kidneys. However, there is no evidence that shows whether chloroform causes liver and kidney cancer in humans.

## Is there a medical test to show whether you have been exposed to chloroform?

Although we can measure the amount of chloroform in the air you breathe out and in blood, urine, and body tissues, we have no reliable test to determine how much chloroform you have been exposed to or whether you will experience any harmful health effects.

The measurement of chloroform in body fluids and tissues may help to determine if you have come into contact with large amounts of chloroform. However, these tests are useful only a short time after you are exposed to chloroform because it leaves the body quickly.

## What has been done to protect human health?

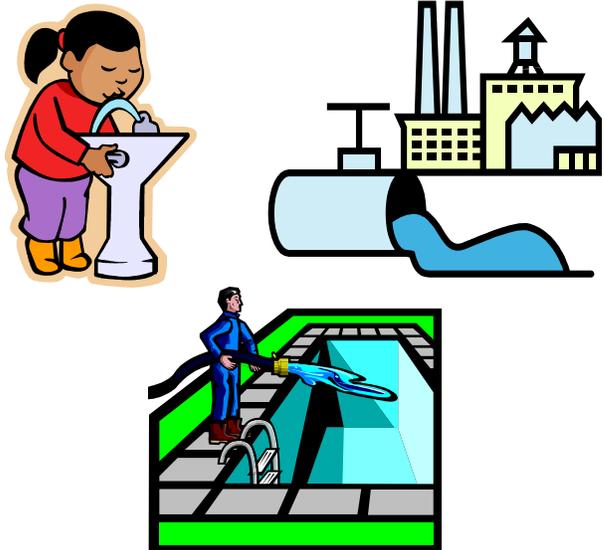
The amount of chloroform normally expected to be in the air ranges from 0.02 to 0.05 parts of chloroform per billion parts (ppb) of air and from 2 to 44 ppb in treated drinking water.

**Notes:** The below unit of measurement will be found in the ppb (parts per billion) range. Examples: One part per billion (1 ppb) would be equal to having one bean in a pile of one billion beans, or one ppb would be equal to one second of time in 32 years.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has set the level of chloroform in drinking water at 80 ppb.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set a permissible 50,000 ppb exposure limit of air in the workplace during an 8-hour workday, 40-hour week.

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



## For more information contact:

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## Reference:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1997. Toxicological profile for chloroform. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

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