

Formaldehyde

Definition

Formaldehyde is a volatile organic compound that is colorless, flammable, strong-smelling and commonly known as a preservative in medical laboratories and mortuaries. Also found in chemicals, particle board, household products, vaccines, glues, permanent-press fabrics, paper, fiberboard, plywood and plastic products. Widely used as an industrial fungicide, germicide, disinfectant, in adhesives, paper towels, insulation, computers, automobiles, building products, furniture, cabinets and textiles, etc.

Where Does Formaldehyde Come From?

Its major source in homes is composite wood products made with urea-formaldehyde resins. These include particle-board, interior hardwood paneling, and medium density fiberboard (MDF). It also occurs in combustion processes, such as forest fires, automotive exhaust and cooking. Low levels occur naturally in fruits and vegetables, including apples, carrots and bananas.

How Might I Be Exposed To Formaldehyde?

The primary way we can be exposed is by breathing air containing it. Releases into the air occur from industries using or manufacturing formaldehyde. Indoor air contains higher levels than outdoor air. Groups at potentially high risk include health care professionals and medical lab technicians, mortuary employees, as well as teachers and students who handle biological specimens preserved with formaldehyde or formalin.

Potential Health Effects of Formaldehyde

Long-term exposure to low levels in the air can cause nasal, eye and throat irritation that can make you cough and wheeze. Neurological effects, increased risk of asthma and/or allergy and changes in lung function have been observed. It can cause asthma-like respiratory problems and skin irritation such as dermatitis and itching.

How Can I Reduce The Risk Of Exposure To Formaldehyde?

Removing formaldehyde sources in the home can reduce exposure. As it is usually found in the air, opening windows and using fans to bring fresh air indoors are the easiest ways to lower levels in the house. Not smoking and not using unvented heaters indoors can lower its levels. Providing fresh air, sealing unfinished manufactured wood surfaces and washing new permanent-press clothing before wearing, can help lower exposure.



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