



Health Benefits

What is Formaldehyde?

Formaldehyde is an important industrial chemical used to make other chemicals, building materials, and household products. It is one of the large family of chemical compounds called volatile organic compounds or 'VOCs'. The term volatile means that the compounds vaporize, that is, become a gas, at normal room temperatures. Formaldehyde serves many purposes in products. It is used as a part of:

- the glue or adhesive in pressed wood products (particleboard, hardwood plywood, and medium density fiberboard (MDF));
- preservatives in some paints, coatings, and cosmetics;
- the coating that provides permanent press quality to fabrics and draperies;
- the finish used to coat paper products; and
- certain insulation materials (urea-formaldehyde foam and fiberglass insulation).

Formaldehyde is released into the air by burning wood, kerosene or natural gas, by automobiles, and by cigarettes. Formaldehyde can off-gas from materials made with it. It is also a naturally occurring substance. The U.S. Consumer Safety Commission has produced this booklet to tell you about formaldehyde found in the indoor air. This booklet tells you where you may come in contact with formaldehyde, how it may affect your health, and how you might reduce your exposure to it.

Why Should You Be Concerned?

Formaldehyde is a colorless, strong-smelling gas. When present in the air at levels above 0.1 ppm (parts in a million parts of air), it can cause watery eyes, burning sensations in the eyes, nose and throat, nausea, coughing, chest tightness, wheezing, skin rashes, and allergic reactions. It has also been observed to cause cancer in scientific studies using laboratory animals and may cause cancer in humans. Typical exposures to humans are much lower; thus any risk of causing cancer is believed to be small at the level at which humans are exposed. Formaldehyde can affect people differently. Some people are very sensitive to formaldehyde while others may not have any noticeable reaction to the same level.

Persons have developed allergic reactions (allergic skin disease and hives) to formaldehyde through skin contact with solutions of formaldehyde or durable-press clothing containing formaldehyde. Others have developed asthmatic reactions and skin rashes from exposure to formaldehyde.

Do You Have Formaldehyde-Related Symptoms?

There are several formaldehyde-related symptoms, such as watery eyes, runny nose, burning sensation in eyes, nose, and throat, headaches, and fatigue. These symptoms may also occur because of the common cold, the flu or other pollutants that may be present in the indoor air. If these symptoms lessen when you are away from home or office but reappear upon your return, they may be caused by indoor pollutants, including formaldehyde. Examine your environment. Have you recently moved into a new or different home or office? Have you recently remodeled or installed new cabinets or furniture? Symptoms may be due to formaldehyde exposure. You should contact your physician and/or state or local health department for help. Your physician can help to determine if the cause of your symptoms is formaldehyde or other pollutants.

For a copy of "The Inside Story: A Guide to Indoor Air Quality," contact The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Indoor Air Quality Clearinghouse [IAQINFO] at:

P.O. Box 37133
Washington, DC 20013-7133
1-800-438-4318
(703) 356-4020
(fax) (703) 356-5386

Source: ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY – www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/formald2.html

This information was acquired from the following organizations:

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY; AMERICAN LUNG ASSOCIATION; US CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY COMMISSION



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Green Solutions.

7975 180 R Avenue SE Wahpeton, ND 58075 701-642-3286 www.sorm.com