

# Chronic benzene exposure: What you need to know

## What is benzene?

Benzene is a chemical that is a colourless liquid at room temperature with a sweet smell. Benzene is known to cause health issues in people.

## How are people exposed to benzene?

People are exposed to benzene when they breathe it in from the air.

Benzene is released into the air through manufacturing of things such as Styrofoam, plastics and rubbers. Small amounts of benzene are also released into the air by vehicles, smoking and at gas stations.

Higher than normal levels of benzene have been found in the air in Sarnia and Aamjiwnaang First Nation due to manufacturing in the area.

## What is chronic benzene exposure

In general, breathing in small amounts of benzene in the home or in the outside air is not something to worry about.

Benzene becomes a problem for people if large amounts are breathed in over long periods of time. Breathing in benzene over a long period of time is called chronic benzene exposure.

**If you live in a community that is close to a manufacturing plant that releases high levels of benzene into the air, you may be at risk for health problems from chronic benzene exposure.**

## Which health problems may be caused by chronic benzene exposure?

Chronic benzene exposure can cause diseases and cancers of the blood such as myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS) and acute myeloid leukemia (AML). It may also cause other blood cancers and lung cancer but MDS and AML are the biggest concerns from benzene exposure.

## What to do if you have been exposed to high levels of benzene?

Talk to your primary care provider (family doctor or nurse) about your health and your concerns about benzene exposure. They may recommend that you get regular blood tests to check for any signs of blood disease.

The main signs and symptoms of blood cancers are listed below. If you have any of these symptoms at any time, contact your primary care provider to get a check-up.

### Potential signs and symptoms of blood cancer

- Unusual bleeding or bruising
- Dizziness

- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Petechiae (small pinpoint of blood under the skin)
- Frequent infections and/or wounds/cuts that don't heal

Your primary care provider can also help you cope with your emotions if you are feeling worried or concerned. Contact your clinic if you have any more questions or need more information.

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