

Antimony

What is antimony?

(Pronounced an'ti-mo-nee)

Antimony is a silvery-white metal that is found in the earth's crust. Antimony ores are mined and then mixed with other metals to form antimony alloys or combined with oxygen to form antimony oxide. Little antimony is currently mined in the United States. It is brought into this country from other countries for processing. However, there are companies in the United States that produce antimony as a by-product of smelting lead and other metals. Antimony isn't used alone because it breaks easily, but when mixed into alloys, it is used in lead storage batteries, solder, sheet and pipe metal, bearings, castings, and pewter. Antimony oxide is added to textiles and plastics to prevent them from catching fire. It is also used in paints, ceramics, and fireworks, and as enamels for plastics, metal, and glass.

What happens to antimony when it enters the environment?

- Antimony is released to the environment from natural sources and from industry.
- In the air, antimony is attached to very small particles that may stay in the air for many days.
- Most antimony ends up in soil, where it attaches strongly to particles that contain iron, manganese, or aluminum.
- Antimony is found at low levels in some rivers, lakes, and streams.

How might I be exposed to antimony?

- Because antimony is found naturally in the environment, the general population is exposed to low levels of it every day, primarily in food, drinking water, and air.
- It may be found in air near industries that process or release it, such as smelters, coal-fired plants, and refuse incinerators.
- In polluted areas containing high levels of antimony, it may be found in the air, water, and soil.
- Workers in industries that process it or use antimony ore may be exposed to higher levels.

How can antimony affect my health?

Exposure to antimony at high levels can result in a variety of adverse health effects.

Breathing high levels for a long time can irritate your eyes and lungs and can cause heart and lung problems, stomach pain, diarrhea, vomiting, and stomach ulcers.

In short-term studies, animals that breathed very high levels of antimony died. Animals that breathed high levels had lung, heart, liver, and kidney damage. In long-term studies, animals that breathed very low levels of antimony had eye irritation, hair loss, lung damage, and heart problems. Problems with fertility were also noted. In animal studies, problems with fertility have been seen when rats breathed very high levels of antimony for a few months.

Ingesting large doses of antimony can cause vomiting. We don't know what other effects may be caused by ingesting it. Long-term animal studies have reported liver damage and blood changes when animals ingested antimony. Antimony can irritate the skin if it is left on it.

Antimony can have beneficial effects when used for medical reasons. It has been used as a medicine to treat people infected with parasites.

How likely is antimony to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have not classified antimony as to its human carcinogenicity.

Lung cancer has been observed in some studies of rats that breathed high levels of antimony. No human studies are available. We don't know whether antimony will cause cancer in people.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to antimony?

Tests are available to measure antimony levels in the body. Antimony can be measured in the urine, feces, and blood for several days after exposure. However, these tests cannot tell you how much antimony you have been exposed to or whether you will experience any health effects. Some tests are not usually performed in most doctors' offices and may require special equipment to conduct them.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA allows 0.006 parts of antimony per million parts of drinking water (0.006 ppm). The EPA requires that discharges or spills into the environment of 5,000 pounds or more of antimony be reported. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set an occupational exposure limit of 0.5 milligrams of antimony per cubic meter of air (0.5 mg/m³) for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek. The American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) currently recommend the same guidelines for the workplace as OSHA.

Glossary

Carcinogenicity: Ability to cause cancer.

Ingestion: Taking food or drink into your body.

Long-term: Lasting one year or more.

Milligram (mg): One thousandth of a gram.

Parasite: An organism living in or on another organism.

PPM: Parts per million.

Short-term: Lasting 14 days or less.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 1992. Toxicological profile for antimony. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

Where can I get more information?

ATSDR can tell you where to find occupational and environmental health clinics. Their specialists can recognize, evaluate, and treat illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances. You can also contact your community or state health or environmental quality department if you have any more questions or concerns.

For more information, contact:

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
Division of Toxicology
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Atlanta, GA 30333
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