Acetone

SUMMARY: Exposure to acetone results mostly from breathing air, drinking water, or coming in contact with products or soil that contain acetone. Exposure to moderate-to-high amounts of acetone can irritate your eyes and respiratory system, and make you dizzy. Very high exposure may cause you to lose consciousness. This chemical has been found in at least 572 of 1,416 National Priorities List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency.

What is acetone?

Acetone is a manufactured chemical that is also found naturally in the environment. It is a colorless liquid with a distinct smell and taste. It evaporates easily, is flammable, and dissolves in water. It is also called dimethyl ketone, 2-propanone, and beta-ketopropane.

Acetone is used to make plastic, fibers, drugs, and other chemicals. It is also used to dissolve other substances.

It occurs naturally in plants, trees, volcanic gases, forest fires, and as a product of the breakdown of body fat. It is present in vehicle exhaust, tobacco smoke, and landfill sites. Industrial processes contribute more acetone to the environment than natural processes.

What happens to acetone when it enters the environment?

- A large percentage (97%) of the acetone released during its manufacture or use goes into the air.
- In air, about one-half of the total amount breaks down from sunlight or other chemicals every 22 days.
- It moves from the atmosphere into the water and soil by rain and snow.
- It also moves quickly from soil and water back to air.
- Acetone doesn’t bind to soil or build up in animals.
- It’s broken down by microorganisms in soil and water.
- It can move into groundwater from spills or landfills.
- Acetone is broken down in water and soil, but the time required for this to happen varies.

How might I be exposed acetone?

- Breathing low background levels in the environment.
- Breathing higher levels of contaminated air in the workplace or from using products that contain acetone (for example, household chemicals, nail polish, and paint). Drinking water or eating food containing acetone.
- Touching products containing acetone.
- For children, eating soil at landfills or hazardous waste sites that contain acetone.
- Smoking or breathing secondhand smoke.
How can acetone affect my health?

If you are exposed to acetone, it goes into your blood, which then carries it to all the organs in your body. If it is a small amount, the liver breaks it down to chemicals that are not harmful and uses these chemicals to make energy for normal body functions. Breathing moderate- to-high levels of acetone for short periods of time, however, can cause nose, throat, lung, and eye irritation; headaches; light-headedness; confusion; increased pulse rate; effects on blood; nausea; vomiting; unconsciousness and possibly coma; and shortening of the menstrual cycle in women.

Swallowing very high levels of acetone can result in unconsciousness and damage to the skin in your mouth. Skin contact can result in irritation and damage to your skin.

Health effects from long-term exposures are known mostly from animal studies. Kidney, liver, and nerve damage, increased birth defects, and lowered ability to reproduce (males only) occurred in animals exposed long-term. It is not known if people would have these same effects.

How likely is acetone 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 acetone for carcinogenicity.

Acetone does not cause skin cancer in animals when applied to the skin. We don't know if breathing or swallowing acetone for long periods will cause cancer. Studies of workers exposed to it found no significant risk of death from cancer.

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

Methods are available to measure the amount of acetone in your breath, blood, and urine. The test can tell you how much acetone you were exposed to, although the amount that people have naturally in their bodies varies with each person. The tests can't tell you if you will experience any health effects from the exposure.

The test must be performed within 2-3 days after exposure because acetone leaves your body within a few days. These tests are not routinely performed at your doctor's office, but your doctor can take blood or urine samples and send them to a testing laboratory.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?
The EPA requires that spills of 5,000 pounds or more of acetone be reported.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set a maximum concentration limit in workplace air of 1,000 parts of acetone per million parts of air (1,000 ppm) for an 8-hour workday over a 40-hour week to protect workers. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends an exposure limit of 250 ppm in workplace air for up to a 10-hour workday over a 40-hour workweek.

This factsheet was adapted from ATSDR.
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