

Cyanide

Cyanide is a fast acting, deadly chemical that can be a colorless gas or crystal.

Cyanide is naturally present in some foods (peach pits) and is contained in cigarette smoke

Cyanide gas is sometimes described as having a "bitter almond" smell, but it does not always have an odor and not everyone can detect its odor.

Why has cyanide become a current issue?

It has become a current issue because it is considered a potential warfare agent.

How can I be exposed to cyanide?

Cyanide can enter water, soil, or air from natural processes, industrial activities, or deliberately to harm people. People may be exposed by breathing air, drinking water, eating food, or touching soil that contains cyanide. Smoking cigarettes is probably one of the major sources of exposure for people who do not work in a cyanide-related industry.

How does cyanide gas work?

Cyanide gas is most dangerous in enclosed places where the gas will be trapped. It evaporates and disperses quickly in open places. It is less heavy than air, so it will rise. Cyanide gas prevents the body from getting oxygen so that cells die.

What are the symptoms of cyanide exposure?

If exposed to a small amount of cyanide by breathing it, the following symptoms occur within minutes:

- ◆ Fast breathing
- ◆ Restlessness
- ◆ Dizziness
- ◆ Weakness
- ◆ Headache
- ◆ Upset stomach and vomiting
- ◆ Rapid heart rate

Exposure to large amounts of cyanide by any means may cause these symptoms:

- ◆ Convulsions
- ◆ Low blood pressure
- ◆ Slow heart rate
- ◆ Loss of consciousness
- ◆ Lung injury
- ◆ Respiratory failure leading to death

Survivors of serious cyanide poisoning may develop symptoms of Parkinson's Disease.

How can I protect myself and what should I do if I am exposed to cyanide?

First, get fresh air by leaving the area where the cyanide was released. If you can not leave the area, stay as low to the ground as possible. Remove any clothing that has liquid cyanide on it. Store the clothing in a plastic bag and then seal the bag in another plastic bag. If your eyes are burning and site is blurred, rinse eyes with water for 10 to 15 minutes. Wash any cyanide from the skin with soap and water. If you have swallowed cyanide do not induce vomiting or give fluids to drink. In all instances, seek medical attention as soon as possible.

What is the treatment?

Cyanide poisoning is treated with antidotes. Supportive care and hospitalization may be necessary to minimize the effects of the poisoning.

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