

DDT, DDE, and DDD - ToxFAQs™

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This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about DDT, DDE, and DDD. For more information, call the CDC Information Center at 1-800-232-4636. This fact sheet is one in a series of summaries about hazardous substances and their health effects. It is important you understand this information because this substance may harm you. The effects of exposure to any hazardous substance depend on the dose, the duration, how you are exposed, personal traits and habits, and whether other chemicals are present.

HIGHLIGHTS: Exposure to DDT, DDE, and DDD occurs mostly from eating foods containing small amounts of these compounds, particularly meat, fish and poultry. High levels of DDT can affect the nervous system causing excitability, tremors and seizures. In women, DDE can cause a reduction in the duration of lactation and an increased chance of having a premature baby. DDT, DDE, and DDD have been found in at least 442 of the 1,613 National Priorities List (NPL) sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What are DDT, DDE, and DDD?

DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane) is a pesticide once widely used to control insects in agriculture and insects that carry diseases such as malaria. DDT is a white, crystalline solid with no odor or taste. Its use in the U.S. was banned in 1972 because of damage to wildlife, but is still used in some countries.

DDE (dichlorodiphenyldichloroethylene) and DDD (dichlorodiphenyldichloroethane) are chemicals similar to DDT that contaminate commercial DDT preparations. DDE has no commercial use. DDD was also used to kill pests, but its use has also been banned. One form of DDD has been used medically to treat cancer of the adrenal gland.

What happens to DDT, DDE, and DDD when they enter the environment?

- DDT entered the environment when it was used as a pesticide; it still enters the environment due to current use in other countries.
- DDE enters the environment as contaminant or breakdown product of DDT; DDD also enters the environment as a breakdown product of DDT.
- DDT, DDE, and DDD in air are rapidly broken down by sunlight. Half of what's in air breaks down within 2 days.
- They stick strongly to soil; most DDT in soil is broken down slowly to DDE and DDD by microorganisms; half the DDT in soil will break down in 2–15 years, depending on the type of soil.
- Only a small amount will go through the soil into groundwater; they do not dissolve easily in water.
- DDT, and especially DDE, build up in plants and in fatty tissues of fish, birds, and other animals.

How might I be exposed to DDT, DDE, and DDD?

- Eating contaminated foods, such as root and leafy vegetables, fatty meat, fish, and poultry, but levels are very low.
- Eating contaminated imported foods from countries that still allow the use of DDT to control pests.
- Breathing contaminated air or drinking contaminated water near waste sites and landfills that may contain higher levels of these chemicals.
- Infants fed on breast milk from mothers who have been exposed.
- Breathing or swallowing soil particles near waste sites or landfills that contain these chemicals.

How can DDT, DDE, and DDD affect my health?

DDT affects the nervous system. People who accidentally swallowed large amounts of DDT became excitable and had tremors and seizures. These effects went away after the exposure stopped. No effects were seen in people who took small daily doses of DDT by capsule for 18 months. A study in humans showed that women who had high amounts of a form of DDE in their breast milk were unable to breast feed their babies for as long as women who had little DDE in the breast milk. Another study in humans showed that women who had high amounts of DDE in the blood had an increased chance of having premature babies. In animals, short-term exposure to large amounts of DDT in food affected the nervous system, while long-term exposure to smaller amounts affected the liver. Also in animals, short-term oral exposure to small amounts of DDT or its breakdown products may also have harmful effects on reproduction.

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How likely are DDT, DDE, and DDD to cause cancer?

Studies in DDT-exposed workers did not show increases in cancer. Studies in animals given DDT with the food have shown that DDT can cause liver cancer.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) determined that DDT may reasonable be anticipated to be a human carcinogen.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) determined that DDT may possibly cause cancer in humans. The EPA determined that DDT, DDE, and DDD are probable human carcinogens.

How can DDT, DDE, and DDD affect children?

There are no studies on the health effects of children exposed to DDT, DDE, or DDD. We can assume that children exposed to large amounts of DDT will have health effects similar to the effects seen in adults. However, we do not know whether children differ from adults in their susceptibility to these substances.

There is no evidence that DDT, DDE, or DDD cause birth defects in people. A study showed that teenage boys whose mothers had higher DDE amounts in the blood when they were pregnant were taller than those whose mothers had lower DDE levels. However, a different study found the opposite in preteen girls. The reason for the discrepancy between these studies is unknown.

Studies in rats have shown that DDT and DDE can mimic the action of natural hormones and in this way affect the development of the reproductive and nervous systems. Puberty was delayed in male rats given high amounts of DDE as juveniles. This could possibly happen in humans.

A study in mice showed that exposure to DDT during the first weeks of life may cause neurobehavioral problems later in life.

How can families reduce the risk of exposure to DDT, DDE, and DDE?

- Most families will be exposed to DDT by eating food or drinking liquids contaminated with small amounts of DDT.
- Cooking will reduce the amount of DDT in fish.
- Washing fruit and vegetables will remove most DDT from their surface.
- Follow health advisories that tell you about consumption of fish and wildlife caught in contaminated areas.

Is there a medical test to show whether I've been exposed to DDT, DDE, and DDD?

Laboratory tests can detect DDT, DDE, and DDD in fat, blood, urine, semen, and breast milk. These tests may show low, moderate, or excessive exposure to these compounds, but cannot tell the exact amount you were exposed to, or whether you will experience adverse effects. These tests are not routinely available at the doctor's office because they require special equipment.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) sets a limit of 1 milligram of DDT per cubic meter of air (1 mg/m³) in the workplace for an 8-hour shift, 40-hour workweek.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has set limits for DDT, DDE, and DDD in foodstuff at or above which the agency will take legal action to remove the products from the market.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2002. Toxicological Profile for DDT/DDE/DDD (Update). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

Where can I get more information?

For more information, contact the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Division of Toxicology and Human Health Sciences, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-57, Atlanta, GA 30329-4027.

Phone: 1-800-232-4636

ToxFAQs™ Internet address via WWW is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaqs/index.asp>.

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.