Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry

ToxFAQs™ for Aluminum

(*Aluminio*)

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This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about aluminum. For more information, call the ATSDR Information Center at 1-888-422-8737. 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

Everyone is exposed to low levels of aluminum from food, air, water, and soil. Exposure to high levels of aluminum may result in respiratory and neurological problems. Aluminum (in compounds combined with other elements) has been found in at least 596 of the 1,699 National Priority List (NPL) sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is aluminum?

Aluminum is the most abundant metal in the earth's crust. It is always found combined with other elements such as oxygen, silicon, and fluorine. Aluminum as the metal is obtained from aluminum-containing minerals. Small amounts of aluminum can be found dissolved in water.

Aluminum metal is light in weight and silvery-white in appearance. Aluminum is used for beverage cans, pots and pans, airplanes, siding and roofing, and foil. Aluminum is often mixed with small amounts of other metals to form aluminum alloys, which are stronger and harder.

Aluminum compounds have many different uses, for example, as alums in water-treatment and alumina in abrasives and furnace linings. They are also found in consumer products such as antacids, astringents, buffered aspirin, food additives, cosmetics, and antiperspirants.

What happens to aluminum when it enters the environment?

- Aluminum cannot be destroyed in the environment, it can only change its form.
- In the air, aluminum binds to small particles, which can stay suspended for many days.
- Under most conditions, a small amount of aluminum will dissolve in lakes, streams, and rivers.
- It can be taken up by some plants from soil.

- Aluminum is not accumulated to a significant extent in most plants or animals.

How might I be exposed to aluminum?

- Virtually all food, water, air, and soil contain some aluminum.
- The average adult in the U.S. eats about 7-9 mg aluminum per day in their food.
- Breathing higher levels of aluminum dust in workplace air.
- Living in areas where the air is dusty, where aluminum is mined or processed into aluminum metal, near certain hazardous waste sites, or where aluminum is naturally high.
- Eating substances containing high levels of aluminum (such as antacids) especially when eating or drinking citrus products at the same time.
- Children and adults may be exposed to small amounts of aluminum from vaccinations.
- Very little enters your body from aluminum cooking utensils.

How can aluminum affect my health?

Only very small amounts of aluminum that you may inhale, ingest, or have skin contact with will enter the bloodstream.

Exposure to aluminum is usually not harmful, but exposure to high levels can affect your health. Workers who breathe large amounts of aluminum dusts can have lung problems, such as coughing or abnormal chest X-rays. Some workers who breathe aluminum dusts or aluminum fumes have decreased performance in some tests that measure functions of the nervous system.

Some people with kidney disease store a lot of aluminum in their bodies and sometimes develop bone or brain diseases which may be caused by the excess aluminum. Some studies show that people exposed to high levels of aluminum may develop Alzheimer's disease, but other studies have not found this to be true. We do not know for certain whether aluminum causes Alzheimer's disease.

Studies in animals show that the nervous system is a sensitive target of aluminum toxicity. Obvious signs of damage were not seen in animals after high oral doses of aluminum. However, the animals did not perform as well in tests that measured the strength of their grip or how much they moved around.

We do not know if aluminum will affect reproduction in people. Aluminum does not appear to affect fertility in animals.

How likely is aluminum to cause cancer?

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the EPA have not evaluated the carcinogenic potential of aluminum in humans. Aluminum has not been shown to cause cancer in animals.

How can aluminum affect children?

Children with kidney problems who were given aluminum in their medical treatments

developed bone diseases. It does not appear that children are more sensitive to aluminum than adults.

We do not know if aluminum will cause birth defects in people. Birth defects have not been seen in animals. Aluminum in large amounts has been shown to be harmful to unborn and developing animals because it can cause delays in skeletal and neurological development.

Aluminum is found in breast milk, but only a small amount of this aluminum will enter the infant's body through breastfeeding.

How can families reduce the risks of exposure to aluminum?

- Since aluminum is so common and widespread in the environment, families cannot avoid exposure to aluminum.
- Avoid taking large quantities of aluminum-containing antacids and buffered aspirin and take these medications as directed.
- Make sure all medications have child-proof caps so children will not accidentally eat them.

Is there a medical test to determine whether I've been exposed to aluminum?

All people have small amounts of aluminum in their bodies. Aluminum can be measured in blood, bones, feces, or urine. Urine and blood aluminum measurements can tell you whether you have been exposed to larger-than-normal amounts of aluminum. Measuring bone aluminum can also indicate exposure to high levels, but this requires a bone biopsy.

Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA has recommended a Secondary Maximum Contaminant Level (SMCL) of 0.05–0.2 milligrams per liter (mg/L) for aluminum in drinking water. The SMCL is not based on levels that will affect humans or animals. It is based on taste, smell, or color.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) has limited workers' exposure to aluminum in dusts to 15 milligrams per cubic meter (mg/m^3) (total dust) and 5 mg/m^3 (respirable fraction) of air for an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has determined that aluminum used as food additives and medicinals such as antacids are generally safe.

References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2008. Toxicological Profile for Aluminum. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

Where can I get more information?

If you have questions or concerns, please contact your community or state health or environmental quality department or:

For more information, contact:
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry
Division of Toxicology and Environmental Medicine
1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-62
Atlanta, GA 30333
Phone: 1-800-CDC-INFO · 888-232-6348 (TTY)
Fax: 1-770-488-4178
Email: cdcinfo@cdc.gov

ATSDR can also tell you the location of occupational and environmental health clinics. These clinics specialize in recognizing, evaluating, and treating illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous substances.

Information line and technical assistance:
Phone: 888-422-8737
FAX: (770)-488-4178

To order toxicological profiles, contact:
National Technical Information Service
5285 Port Royal Road
Springfield, VA 22161
Phone: 800-553-6847 or 703-605-6000

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