



Health action in crises

FAQs: Japan nuclear concerns

5 April 2011

Health effects

What are the acute health effects of radiation exposure?

- If the dose of radiation exceeds a certain threshold level, it can produce acute effects, including skin redness, hair loss, radiation burns, and acute radiation syndrome (ARS).
- In a nuclear power plant accident, the general population is not likely to be exposed to doses high enough to cause such effects.
- Rescuers, first responders, and nuclear power plant workers are more likely to be exposed to doses of radiation high enough to cause acute effects.

What long-term effects can be expected from radiation exposure?

- Exposure to high doses of radiation can increase the risk of cancer.
- Radioactive iodine can be released during nuclear emergencies. If radioactive iodine is breathed in or swallowed, it will concentrate in the thyroid gland and increase the risk of thyroid cancer. Among persons exposed to radioactive iodine, the risk of thyroid cancer can be lowered by taking potassium iodide pills, which helps prevent the uptake of the radioactive iodine.
- The risk of thyroid cancer following radiation exposure is higher in children and young adults.

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1. [Current risk](#)
 2. [Ionizing radiation](#)
 3. [Human exposure to ionizing radiation](#)
 4. [Travel advice](#)
 5. **[Health effects](#)**
 6. [Public health actions](#)
 7. [Personal protective measures](#)
 8. [Food safety](#)
 9. [Water contamination](#)
 10. [WHO's response](#)

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