

This fact sheet answers the most frequently asked health questions (FAQs) about nickel. 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:** Nickel is a naturally occurring element. Pure nickel is a hard, silvery-white metal used to make stainless steel and other metal alloys. Skin effects are the most common effects in people who are sensitive to nickel. Workers who breathed very large amounts of nickel compounds developed chronic bronchitis and lung and nasal sinus cancers. Nickel has been found in at least 882 of the 1,662 National Priority List sites identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

### What is nickel?

Nickel is a very abundant natural element. Pure nickel is a hard, silvery-white metal. Nickel can be combined with other metals, such as iron, copper, chromium, and zinc, to form alloys. These alloys are used to make coins, jewelry, and items such as valves and heat exchangers. Most nickel is used to make stainless steel.

Nickel can combine with other elements such as chlorine, sulfur, and oxygen to form nickel compounds. Many nickel compounds dissolve fairly easy in water and have a green color. Nickel compounds are used for nickel plating, to color ceramics, to make some batteries, and as substances known as catalysts that increase the rate of chemical reactions. Nickel is found in all soil and is emitted from volcanoes. Nickel is also found in meteorites and on the ocean floor. Nickel and its compounds have no characteristic odor or taste.

### What happens to nickel when it enters the environment?

- Nickel is released into the atmosphere by industries that make or use nickel, nickel alloys, or nickel compounds. It is also released into the atmosphere by oil-burning power plants, coal-burning power plants, and trash incinerators.
- In the air, it attaches to small particles of dust that settle to the ground or are taken out of the air in rain or snow; this usually takes many days.

- Nickel released in industrial waste water ends up in soil or sediment where it strongly attaches to particles containing iron or manganese.
- Nickel does not appear to accumulate in fish or in other animals used as food.

### How might I be exposed to nickel?

- By eating food containing nickel, which is the major source of exposure for most people.
- By skin contact with soil, bath or shower water, or metals containing nickel, as well as by handling coins or touching jewelry containing nickel.
- By drinking water that contains small amounts of nickel.
- By breathing air or smoking tobacco containing nickel.
- Higher exposure may occur if you work in industries that process or use nickel.

### How can nickel affect my health?

The most common harmful health effect of nickel in humans is an allergic reaction. Approximately 10-20% of the population is sensitive to nickel. People can become sensitive to nickel when jewelry or other things containing it are in direct contact with the skin for a long time. Once a person is sensitized to nickel, further contact with the metal may produce a reaction. The most common reaction is a skin rash at the site of contact. The skin rash may also

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occur at a site away from the site of contact. Less frequently, some people who are sensitive to nickel have asthma attacks following exposure to nickel. Some sensitized people react when they consume food or water containing nickel or breathe dust containing it.

People working in nickel refineries or nickel-processing plants have experienced chronic bronchitis and reduced lung function. These persons breathed amounts of nickel much higher than levels found normally in the environment.

Workers who drank water containing high amounts of nickel had stomach ache and suffered adverse effects to their blood and kidneys.

Damage to the lung and nasal cavity has been observed in rats and mice breathing nickel compounds. Eating or drinking large amounts of nickel has caused lung disease in dogs and rats and has affected the stomach, blood, liver, kidneys, and immune system in rats and mice, as well as their reproduction and development.

### How likely is nickel to cause cancer?

Cancers of the lung and nasal sinus have resulted when workers breathed dust containing high levels of nickel compounds while working in nickel refineries or nickel processing plants. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has determined that nickel metal may reasonably be anticipated to be a carcinogen and that nickel compounds are known human carcinogens. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has determined that some nickel compounds are carcinogenic to humans and that metallic nickel may possibly be carcinogenic to humans. The EPA has determined that nickel refinery dust and nickel subsulfide are human carcinogens.

### How can nickel affect children?

It is likely that the health effects seen in children exposed to nickel will be similar to those seen in adults. We do not know whether children differ from adults in their susceptibility to nickel. Human studies that examined whether nickel can harm the fetus are inconclusive. Animal studies have found increases in newborn deaths and

decreased newborn weight after ingesting very high amounts of nickel. Nickel can be transferred from the mother to an infant in breast milk and can cross the placenta.

### How can families reduce the risks of exposure to nickel?

- Avoiding jewelry containing nickel will eliminate risks of exposure to this source of the metal.
- Exposures of the general population from other sources, such as foods and drinking water, are almost always too low to be of concern.

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

There are tests available to measure nickel in your blood, feces, and urine. More nickel was measured in the urine of workers who were exposed to nickel compounds that dissolve easily in water than in the urine of workers exposed to nickel compounds that are hard to dissolve. This means that it is easier to tell if you have been exposed to soluble nickel compounds than less-soluble compounds. The nickel measurements do not accurately predict potential health effects from exposure to nickel.

### Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA recommends that drinking water should contain no more than 0.1 milligrams of nickel per liter of water (0.1 mg/L). To protect workers, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has set a limit of 1 mg of nickel per cubic meter of air (1 mg/m<sup>3</sup>) for metallic nickel and nickel compounds in workplace air during an 8-hour workday, 40-hour workweek.

### References

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). 2005. Toxicological Profile for Nickel (Update). Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Public 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, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Mailstop F-32, Atlanta, GA 30333. Phone: 1-888-422-8737, FAX: 770-488-4178. ToxFAQs Internet address via WWW is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html>. 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.

