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Consumer Factsheet on: TRICHLOROETHYLENE

List of Contaminants

As part of the Drinking Water and Health pages, this fact sheet is part of a larger publication:
National Primary Drinking Water Regulations

This is a factsheet about a chemical that may be found in some public or private drinking water supplies. It may cause health problems if found in amounts greater than the health standard set by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

What is Trichloroethylene and how is it used?

Trichloroethylene is a colorless or blue organic liquid with a chloroform-like odor. The greatest use of trichloroethylene is to remove grease from fabricated metal parts and some textiles.

The list of trade names given below may help you find out whether you are using this chemical at home or work.

Trade Names and Synonyms:

1,1,2-Trichloroethylene
Acetylene trichloroethylene
Algylen
Anameth
Benzinol
Chlorilen
CirCosolv
Germalgene
Lethurin
Perm-a-chlor
Petzinol
Philex
TRI-Plus M
Vitran

Why is Trichloroethylene being Regulated?

In 1974, Congress passed the Safe Drinking Water Act. This law requires EPA to determine safe levels of chemicals in drinking water which do or may cause health problems. These non-enforceable levels, based solely on possible health risks and exposure, are called Maximum Contaminant Level Goals.

The MCLG for trichloroethylene has been set at zero because EPA believes this level of protection would not cause any of the potential health problems described below.

Based on this MCLG, EPA has set an enforceable standard called a Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL). MCLs are set as close to the MCLGs as possible, considering the ability of public water systems to detect and remove contaminants using suitable treatment technologies.

The MCL has been set at 5 parts per billion (ppb) because EPA believes, given present technology and resources, this is the lowest level to which water systems can reasonably be required to remove this contaminant should it occur in drinking water.

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These drinking water standards and the regulations for ensuring these standards are met, are called National Primary Drinking Water Regulations. All public water supplies must abide by these regulations.

What are the Health Effects?

Some people who drink water containing trichloroethylene in excess of the MCL over many years could experience problems with their liver and may have an increased risk of getting cancer.

How much Trichloroethylene is produced and released to the environment?

Production of trichloroethylene has increased from just over 260,000 lbs. in 1981 to 320 million lbs. in 1991. Major environmental releases of trichloroethylene are due to air emissions from metal degreasing plants. Wastewater from metal finishing, paint and ink formulation, electrical/electronic components, and rubber processing industries also may contain trichloroethylene.

From 1987 to 1993, according to the Toxics Release Inventory, trichloroethylene releases to water and land totalled over 291,000 lbs. These releases were primarily from steel pipe and tube manufacturing industries. The largest releases occurred in Pennsylvania and Illinois. The largest direct releases to water occurred in West Virginia.

What happens to Trichloroethylene when it is released to the environment?

Trichloroethylene released to soil will either evaporate or leach into ground water. If released to water, it will also quickly evaporate. It has only a moderate potential to accumulate in aquatic life.

How will Trichloroethylene be Detected in and Removed from My Drinking Water?

The regulation for trichloroethylene became effective in 1989. Between 1993 and 1995, EPA required your water supplier to collect water samples every 3 months for one year and analyze them to find out if TCE is present above 0.5 ppb. If it is present above this level, the system must continue to monitor this contaminant until the system has taken immediate steps to remediate the problem or the State has determined that the contaminant will remain reliably and consistently below the MCL.

If contaminant levels are found to be consistently above the MCL, your water supplier must take steps to reduce the amount of TCE so that it is consistently below that level. The following treatment methods have been approved by EPA for removing TCE: Granular activated carbon in combination with Packed Tower Aeration.

How will I know if Trichloroethylene is in my drinking water?

If the levels of trichloroethylene exceed the MCL, 5 ppb, the system must notify the public via newspapers, radio, TV and other means. Additional actions, such as providing alternative drinking water supplies, may be required to prevent serious risks to public health.

Drinking Water Standards:

Mclg: zero

Mcl: 5 ppb

Trichloroethylene Releases to Water and Land, 1987 to 1993 (in pounds):

	Water		Land
TOTALS (in pounds)	**100,293**		**191,088**
Top Six States*			
PA	0	33,450	
IL	0	30,711	
GA	3,742	17,532	
TX	0	21,000	
MA	0	19,920	
WV	12,822	0	
Major Industries			
Steel pipe, tubes	31		39,288
Misc. Indust. Organics	27,708		0
Car parts, access.	4,405		19,920
Plating, polishing	3,342		20,100
Wool fabric mills	3,942		18,081

* State totals only include facilities with releases greater than 10,000 lbs.

Learn more about your drinking water!

EPA strongly encourages people to learn more about their drinking water, and to support local efforts to protect and upgrade the supply of safe drinking water. Your water bill or telephone books government listings are a good starting point.

Your local water supplier can give you a list of the chemicals they test for in your water, as well as how your water is treated.

Your state Department of Health/Environment is also a valuable source of information.

For help in locating these agencies or for information on drinking water in general, call: EPAs Safe Drinking Water Hotline: (800) 426-4791.

For additional information on the uses and releases of chemicals in your state, contact the: Community Right-to-Know Hotline: (800) 424-9346.

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