

Summary statement

12.64 Formaldehyde

Formaldehyde occurs in industrial effluents and is emitted into air from plastic materials and resin glues. Formaldehyde in drinking-water results primarily from the oxidation of natural organic matter during ozonation and chlorination. Concentrations of up to 30 µg/litre have been found in ozonated drinking-water. Formaldehyde can also be found in drinking-water as a result of release from polyacetal plastic fittings. Formaldehyde's physicochemical properties suggest that it is unlikely to volatilize from water, so exposure by inhalation during showering is expected to be low.

Rats and mice exposed to formaldehyde by inhalation exhibited an increased incidence of carcinomas of the nasal cavity at doses that caused irritation of the nasal epithelium. Ingestion of formaldehyde in drinking-water for 2 years caused stomach irritation in rats. Papillomas of the stomach associated with severe tissue irritation were observed in one study. IARC has classified formaldehyde in Group 2A (probably carcinogenic to humans). The weight of evidence indicates that formaldehyde is not carcinogenic by the oral route.

Owing to formaldehyde's high reactivity, effects in the tissue of first contact following ingestion are more likely to be related to the concentration of the formaldehyde consumed than to its total intake. A tolerable concentration of 2.6 mg/litre for ingested formaldehyde has been established based on a NOEL of 260 mg/litre for histopathological effects in the oral and gastric mucosa of rats administered formaldehyde in their drinking-water for 2 years, using an uncertainty factor of 100 (10 for interspecies variation and 10 for intraspecies variation). In view of the significant difference between the expected concentrations of formaldehyde in drinking-water and the tolerable concentration, it is not considered necessary to set a formal guideline value for formaldehyde.

History of guideline development

The 1958, 1963 and 1971 WHO *International Standards for Drinking-water* and the first edition of the *Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality*, published in 1984, did not refer to formaldehyde. The second edition of the Guidelines established a health-based guideline value of 0.9 mg/litre for formaldehyde in drinking-water. This value was brought forward to the third edition.

Assessment date

The risk assessment was conducted in 2004.

Principal references

IPCS (2002) *Formaldehyde*. Geneva, World Health Organization, International Programme on Chemical Safety (Concise International Chemical Assessment Document 40).

WHO (2005) *Formaldehyde in drinking-water. Background document for development of WHO Guidelines for drinking-water quality*. Geneva, World Health Organization (WHO/SDE/WSH/05.08/48).