



## Salem/Cumberland County Health Department

# **CYANIDE**

(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

### **What is cyanide?**

Cyanide is:

- A fast acting, potentially deadly chemical that can exist in various forms.
- Can be a colorless gas or in crystal form.
- Described as having a “bitter almond” smell, but it does not always give off an odor, and not everyone can detect this odor.

### **What are the symptoms of cyanide exposure?**

People exposed to a small amount of cyanide by breathing it, absorbing it through their skin, or eating foods that contain it may have some or all of the following symptoms within minutes:

- Rapid breathing
- Restlessness
- Dizziness
- Weakness
- Headache
- Nausea and vomiting
- Rapid heart rate



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Exposure to a large amount of cyanide by any route may cause these other health effects as well:

- Convulsions
- Low blood pressure
- Slow heart rate
- Loss of consciousness
- Lung injury
- Respiratory failure leading to death

### **What are the long-term health effects of cyanide exposure?**

Survivors of serious cyanide poisoning may develop heart and brain damage.

### **How can people be exposed to cyanide?**

People can be exposed to cyanide by breathing air, drinking water, eating food, or touching soil that contains cyanide. Cyanide enters water, soil, or air as a result of both natural processes and industrial processes. Smoking cigarettes is probably one of the major sources of cyanide exposure for people who do not work in cyanide-related industries.



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### **How can people protect themselves against cyanide exposure?**

First get fresh air by leaving the area where the cyanide was released. Moving to an area with fresh air is a good way to reduce the possibility of death from exposure to cyanide gas.

- If the cyanide release was outside, move away from the area where the cyanide was released.
- If the cyanide release was indoors, get out of the building.

If leaving the area that was exposed to cyanide is not an option, stay as low to the ground as possible.

### **What should you do if you suspect you have been exposed to cyanide?**

- Remove any clothing that has liquid cyanide on it. If possible, seal the clothing in a plastic, and then seal that bag in a second plastic bag. If clothes were placed in plastic bags, inform the local or state health department or emergency persons upon their arrival. Do not handle the plastic bags.
- Rinse the eyes with plain water for 10 to 15 minutes if they are burning or if vision is blurred.



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- Wash any liquid cyanide from the skin thoroughly with soap and water.
- If cyanide is known to have been swallowed, do not induce vomiting or give fluids to drink.
- Seek medical attention right away. Dial 911 and explain what happened.

### **How is cyanide poisoning treated?**

Cyanide poisoning is treated with specific medicine and supportive medical care in a hospital setting. The most important thing is for victims to seek medical treatment as soon as possible.