



## Salem/Cumberland County Health Department

# LEWISITE

(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

### **What is lewisite?**

Lewisite is a type of chemical warfare agent. It causes blistering of the skin and mucous membranes on contact.

Lewisite:

- Can appear as an oily, colorless liquid or appear yellow to black in color.
- Has an odor like geraniums.
- Contains arsenic, a poison.

### **What are the symptoms of lewisite?**

Signs and symptoms occur immediately following exposure to lewisite. Lewisite can have the following effects on specific parts of the body:

#### **Skin:**

- Pain and irritation within seconds to minutes.
- Redness within 15 to 30 minutes followed by blister formation within several hours. The blister begins as a small blister in the middle of the red areas and then expands to cover the entire reddened area of skin.

#### **Eyes:**

- Irritation
- Pain



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- Swelling
- Tearing may occur on contact

**Respiratory tract:**

- Runny nose
- Sneezing
- Hoarseness
- Bloody nose
- Sinus pain
- Shortness of breath
- Cough

**Digestive tract:**

- Diarrhea
- Nausea
- Vomiting

**Cardiovascular:**

- “Lewisite shock” or low blood pressure may occur.



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**What are the long-term health effects of lewisite?**

- \*Severe skin burning is less likely.
- \*Extensive breathing in of the vapors may cause chronic respiratory disease.
- \*Extensive eye exposure may cause permanent blindness.
- \*Lewisite is not known to suppress the immune system.

**Where is lewisite found, and how is it used?**

Lewisite has been used only as a chemical warfare agent. It has no medical or other practical use. It is not found naturally in the environment.

**How can people be exposed to lewisite?**

People can be exposed by coming in direct contact with liquid lewisite. Lewisite vapor is heavier than air, so it will settle in low-lying areas. People's risk for exposure depends on how close they are to the place where the lewisite was released.



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### **If lewisite gas is released in the air:**

People may be exposed through skin contact or eye contact. They may also be exposed by breathing air that contains lewisite.

### **If lewisite liquid comes in contact with food:**

People may be exposed by eating the contaminated food.

### **If lewisite liquid is released into water:**

People may be exposed by drinking water that contains lewisite or by getting the water on their bodies.

### **How can people protect themselves and what should they do if they are exposed to lewisite?**

- Leave the area where the lewisite was released and get to fresh air. Quickly moving to an area where fresh air is available is highly effective in reducing the possibility of death from exposure to lewisite.
  - If the lewisite release was outdoors, move away from the area where the lewisite was released. Go to the highest ground possible, because lewisite is heavier than air and will sink to low-lying areas.
  - If the lewisite release was indoors, get out of the building.



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- If you think you may have been exposed, remove your clothing, quickly wash your entire body with soap and water, and get medical care as quickly as possible.
- Removing and disposing of clothing:
  - Quickly take off clothing that has liquid lewisite on it. Any clothing that has to be pulled over the head should be cut off the body instead of pulled over the head. If possible, seal the clothing in a plastic bag. Then seal the first plastic bag in a second plastic bag. Removing and sealing the clothing in this way will help protect you and other people from any chemicals that might be on your clothes.
  - If you placed your clothes in plastic bags, inform either the local or state health department or emergency personnel upon their arrival. Do not handle the plastic bags.
  - If you are helping other people remove their clothing, try to avoid touching any contaminated areas, and remove the clothing as quickly as possible.
- Washing the body:
  - As quickly as possible, wash any liquid lewisite from your skin with large amounts of soap and water. Washing with soap and water will help protect people from any chemicals on their bodies.



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- If your eyes are burning or your vision is blurred, rinse your eyes with plain water for 10 to 15 minutes. If you wear contacts, remove them and place them in the bags with the contaminated clothing. Do not put the contacts back in your eyes. If you wear eyeglasses, wash them with soap and water. You can put the eyeglasses back on after you wash them.
- If you have ingested (swallowed) lewisite, do not induce vomiting or drink fluids.
- **Seek medical attention right away. Dial 911 and explain what has happened.**

#### **How is lewisite treated?**

Treatment consists of removing lewisite from the body as soon as possible and providing supportive medical care in a hospital setting. A remedy for lewisite is available and is most useful if given as soon as possible after exposure.

#### **What can people do if they think they are exposed to lewisite?**

If people think they have been exposed to lewisite they should contact the regional poison control center at 1-800-222-1222.