



Salem/Cumberland County Health Department  
**MUSTARD GAS**  
(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

**What is mustard gas?**

Mustard gas, or sulfur mustard, is a chemical warfare agent. These agents are blistering agents because they cause blistering of the skin and mucous membranes on contact. Sometimes it smells like garlic, onions, or mustard and sometimes has no odor. It can be a vapor, an oily-textured liquid, or a solid. It can be clear to yellow or brown when it is in liquid or solid form.

**What are the symptoms of mustard gas exposure?**

People may not know right away that they have been exposed, because mustard gas often has no smell or has a smell that might not cause alarm. Typically, signs and symptoms do not occur immediately. Depending on the severity of the exposure, symptoms may not occur for 2-24 hours. Some people are more sensitive to mustard gas than are other people, and may have symptoms sooner. Exposure to mustard gas is usually not fatal.

Mustard gas can have the following effects on specific parts of the body:



Salem/Cumberland County Health Department  
**MUSTARD GAS**  
(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

**Skin:**

- Redness and itching of the skin may occur within 2-48 hours after exposure and change eventually to yellow blistering under the skin.

**Eyes:**

- Irritation
- Pain
- Swelling
- Tearing may occur within 3-12 hours of a mild to moderate exposure.
- A severe exposure may cause symptoms within 1-2 hours and may include the symptoms of a mild or moderate exposure plus light sensitivity, severe pain, or blindness (lasting up to 10 days).

**Respiratory tract:**

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



Salem/Cumberland County Health Department  
**MUSTARD GAS**  
(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

- Cough within 12-24 hours of a mild exposure and within 2-4 hours of a severe exposure.

**Digestive tract:**

- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhea
- Fever
- Nausea
- Vomiting

Showing these symptoms does not necessarily mean that a person has been exposed to mustard gas.

**Where is mustard gas found and how is it used?**

Mustard gas is not found naturally in the environment. Until recently, it was available for the use of treatment of a skin condition called psoriasis. Currently, it has no medical use.

**How can people be exposed to mustard gas?**

**If it is released into the air:**

Mustard gas can be released into the air as a vapor. People can be exposed through skin contact, eye contact, or breathing. It can be carried long distances by wind.



Salem/Cumberland County Health Department  
**MUSTARD GAS**  
(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

**If it is released into the water:**

People can be exposed to mustard gas by drinking the contaminated water or getting it on their skin.

**If it is released as a liquid:**

People can be exposed by coming in contact with liquid mustard gas.

Sulfur mustard, or mustard gas, can last 1-2 days in the environment under average weather conditions and from weeks to months under very cold conditions. It breaks down slowly in the body so it can build up in the body.

**What are the long-term health effects of exposure to mustard gas?**

- ✓ Exposure to liquid mustard gas is likely to produce second and third degree burns and later scarring. Extensive skin burning can be fatal.
- ✓ Extensive breathing in of the vapors can cause chronic respiratory disease, repeated respiratory infections, or death.
- ✓ Extensive eye exposure can cause permanent blindness.
- ✓ Exposure to mustard gas may increase a person's risk for lung and respiratory cancer.



Salem/Cumberland County Health Department  
**MUSTARD GAS**  
(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

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

- AVOID IT because there is remedy for exposure to mustard gas. Immediately leave the area where the mustard gas was released and find higher ground.
- If you cannot avoid exposure to mustard gas, quickly remove the mustard gas from the body. Getting it off as soon as possible after exposure is the only way to prevent or decrease tissue damage to the body.
- Quickly remove any clothing that has liquid mustard gas on it. If it is possible, seal the clothing in a plastic bag, and seal that bag inside a second plastic bag.
- Immediately wash any exposed part of the body thoroughly with plain, clean water. Eyes need to be flushed with water for 5-10 minutes. Do NOT cover eyes with bandages, but do protect them with dark glasses or goggles.
- If someone has ingested mustard gas, do NOT induce vomiting. Give the person milk to drink.
- Seek medical attention right away. Dial 911 and explain what has happened.



Salem/Cumberland County Health Department  
**MUSTARD GAS**  
(PUBLIC HANDOUT)



**How is exposure to mustard gas treated?**

The most important factor is removing it from the body. Exposure to mustard gas is treated by giving the victim supportive care to minimize the effects of exposure. Though no remedy exists for it, exposure is not usually fatal.

**Where can people get more information about mustard gas?**

- Poison Control Center: 1-800-222-1222
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
  - English: 1-888-246-2675
  - Spanish: 1-888-246-2857
  - TTY: 1-866-874-2646