

# About ATSDR

## 1. What is the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)?

ATSDR is the principal federal public health agency involved with hazardous waste issues. The agency is responsible for preventing or reducing the harmful effects of exposure to hazardous substances on human health and quality of life. ATSDR is part of the U.S.



Department of Health and Human Services. The agency was created by the Superfund law in 1980. That law started a program to find and clean up the most dangerous hazardous waste sites. ATSDR was formally organized in 1985. It is responsible for carrying out the health-related parts of the Superfund law and of other laws that protect the public health from hazardous wastes and environmental spills of hazardous substances. It is responsible for determining, as best as possible, whether people have harmful health effects from their exposure to hazardous substances.



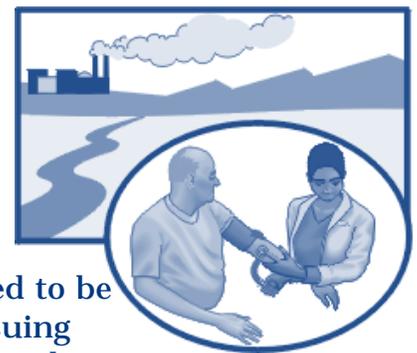
## 2. Where is ATSDR located? How big is it?

ATSDR's headquarters are in Atlanta, Georgia. The agency has 10 regional offices and an office in Washington, D.C. The multidisciplinary staff of approximately 400 includes epidemiologists, physicians, toxicologists, engineers, public health educators, and support staff.

## 3. What does ATSDR do?

ATSDR does a number of activities to help prevent or reduce the harmful health effects of exposure to hazardous substances, including these:

- ATSDR advises the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as well as other federal and state agencies, community members, and other interested parties, on the health impacts of hazardous waste sites and toxic spills. ATSDR identifies communities where people might be exposed to hazardous substances in the environment. The agency also determines how hazardous a site is and recommends actions that need to be taken to safeguard people's health. It does this by issuing public health advisories, public health assessments, and health consultations.
- ATSDR conducts studies in some communities at or near hazardous waste sites and toxic spills to determine if people's health have been affected by their exposure to hazardous substances. ATSDR also funds research conducted by universities, state agencies, and others who study the relationship between exposure to hazardous substances and disease.



- ATSDR educates doctors, other health care professionals, and communities about the health effects of hazardous substances and how to lessen their exposure to hazardous substances. For example, the agency has developed educational programs that teach children and parents ways to reduce lead exposure.
  - ATSDR conducts and funds studies on hazardous substances. The agency publishes documents called “toxicological profiles” on many of the hazardous substances most commonly found at Superfund sites.
- ATSDR provides technical support and advice to other federal agencies, states, and local governments that respond to accidental spills or releases of hazardous substances, such as from train wrecks, fires, and other emergencies.
- ATSDR maintains four subregistries of people who have been exposed to hazardous substances—trichloroethylene (TCE), trichloroethane (TCA), benzene, and dioxin. These subregistries track health data from participants to learn more about the health consequences of their exposure to low levels of these chemicals.

#### **4. What are some of the things ATSDR does to help a community that may be exposed to hazardous substances?**

ATSDR can help communities in a variety of ways, including working with them to resolve their health concerns, determining whether the community is actually being exposed to hazardous substances, educating residents about health hazards, and training health care providers.

One of ATSDR’s key responsibilities is to determine the extent of hazard to the public’s health from hazardous substances at Superfund and other hazardous waste sites. An important part of determining whether a hazard exists is to meet with members of the community to hear their health concerns.

ATSDR can take steps to help communities deal with those health concerns. For example, at a site in southwestern Virginia, residents were concerned about children eating contaminated fish from a river where fishing was banned. ATSDR worked with the community to develop an educational program to teach children not to eat fish from the river. ATSDR also works with local health care providers to ensure they have the information they need about possible exposures to hazardous substances in their community.

ATSDR may send staff to a community to draw blood or collect urine to determine whether people are being exposed to a hazardous substance. ATSDR has been able to reassure some communities that people there were not being exposed to hazardous substances. And, in other cases, after determining that some people were being exposed to hazardous substances, ATSDR has been able to advise communities about how to reduce their exposure.

In some cases, ATSDR provides medical monitoring for communities exposed to hazardous substances. The medical monitoring is intended to screen for specific diseases or health problems that are likely to have been caused by exposure to a specific hazardous substance. Communities must meet seven criteria to be selected for medical monitoring.

### **5. What are some of the things ATSDR cannot do to help a community?**

There are some things that ATSDR does not have the legal authority to do. ATSDR cannot provide medical care or treatment to people who have been exposed to hazardous substances, even if the exposure has made them ill. ATSDR also cannot provide funds for relocation or for clean up of a site.

### **6. How is ATSDR's role in helping communities different from EPA's role?**

Unlike EPA, ATSDR is not a regulatory agency. ATSDR is a public health agency that advises EPA on the health aspects of hazardous waste sites or spills. ATSDR makes recommendations to EPA when specific actions are needed to protect the public's health. For example, ATSDR might recommend providing an alternative water supply, removing contaminated material, or restricting access to a site. EPA usually follows these recommendations. However, ATSDR cannot require EPA to follow its recommendations.



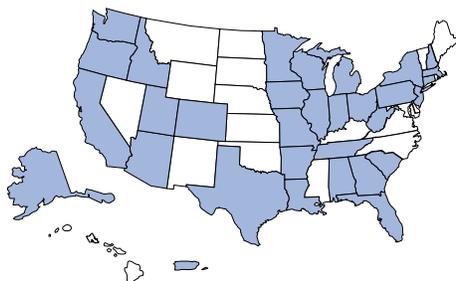
### **7. How does ATSDR become involved with a site? How can I get ATSDR involved with a site?**

ATSDR is required by the Superfund law to become involved with all sites that are on or proposed for the National Priorities List (NPL). Specifically, ATSDR conducts public health assessments of NPL sites, as well as of all sites proposed for the NPL.

EPA, state agencies, local governments, or other federal agencies may request ATSDR's help with a site or cases of accidental spills or releases. Anyone may request that ATSDR do a health consultation. Most requests for health consultations come from EPA and state and local agencies.

Anyone may also petition ATSDR to conduct public health assessments of sites. For more information about how to petition ATSDR to conduct a public health assessment, call ATSDR's toll-free information line, 888-42-ATSDR (888-422-8737).

### **8. How does ATSDR work with states and local health departments?**



ATSDR has cooperative agreements with 33 states, tribes, and territories to conduct site-related public health assessments or health consultations, health studies, and health education. In states that have cooperative agreements, ATSDR provides technical assistance and oversees site evaluations and related activities done by state staff. ATSDR also assists local health departments to investigate health concerns that might be related to hazardous substances.

**9. Does ATSDR assist communities located near hazardous waste sites that are not on the NPL?**

Yes. More than half of the sites ATSDR has worked at are not on the NPL.

**10. What information does ATSDR provide through its Internet web site?**

Information that can be accessed through ATSDR's web site includes these items:

- information about ATSDR
- a database containing information on all sites ATSDR has worked at
- short, easy-to-read fact sheets about more than 150 of the most common contaminants at Superfund sites
- links to related Internet sites.



ATSDR's Internet address is <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov>



**11. Who can I call at ATSDR for more information?**

For more information, contact ATSDR's toll-free information line:  
**(888) 42-ATSDR. . . that's (888) 422-8737.**

**ATSDR**  
AGENCY FOR TOXIC SUBSTANCES  
AND DISEASE REGISTRY