# FACT SHEET ON FORMALDEHYDE

## What is formaldehyde?

Formaldehyde (HCHO) is a colorless gas which has a pungent, irritating odor. Formaldehyde has traditionally been used as a constituent in products such as embalming fluids, fungicides, and bactericides. It is also used to produce other chemicals and resins.

## What products can emit formaldehyde?

Formaldehyde may be released from urea-formaldehyde foam insulation (UFFI), some particle board, chip board, plywood, and wood paneling. Formaldehyde may also be released from carpeting, curtains, and permanent press fabrics. Some other common household products that may contain formaldehyde are cosmetics, deodorants, detergents, paints, and paper products. Cigarette smoke also contains formaldehyde.

## Why is there a concern about formaldehyde?

Human exposure to formaldehyde in the air represents a potential for health problems such as eye, nose, and throat irritation; coughing; shortness of breath; skin rash or irritation; nausea; vomiting; headaches; dizziness; nosebleeds; and asthma and flu-like symptoms. The severity of the human reaction to formaldehyde depends on the exposure concentration, the duration of the exposure, and the sensitivity of the individual. A single exposure may not cause a reaction; however, repeated or long-term exposure may increase an individual's sensitivity to the gas. Some people develop acute (short-term) health effects from exposure to formaldehyde. Some people can develop an allergic response to formaldehyde and can become sensitized to it because of long-term exposure at low concentrations. Adverse health effects may be more pronounced in persons already suffering from other allergies, asthma, and respiratory disorders.

The chronic (long-term) effects of human exposure to formaldehyde are still uncertain. Additional federal studies are being conducted to further evaluate the human carcinogenicity of formaldehyde.

## What do studies show about exposure to formaldehyde?

An industry sponsored study has found that breathing formaldehyde causes nasal cancer in laboratory animals.[1] While formaldehyde levels in the home are lower than the levels which caused cancer in the study, there is concern about consumer exposure to these low levels. The U.S. Consumer

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[1] J.A. Swenberg, W.D. Kerns, R.I. Mitchell, E.J. Gralla and K.L. Pavkov. Induction of Squamous Cell Carcinomas of the Rat Nasal Cavity by Inhalation Exposure to Formaldehyde Vapor. Cancer Research 40:3398-3401, 1980.



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