

# Everything You Need to Know About Arsenic Poisoning



Medically reviewed by [Elaine K. Luo, M.D.](#) — Written by [Kristeen Cherney](#) — Updated on April 23, 2018

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## How toxic is arsenic?

Arsenic poisoning, or arsenicosis, occurs after the ingestion or inhalation of high levels of arsenic. Arsenic is a type of carcinogen that's gray, silver, or white in color. Arsenic is extremely poisonous to humans. What makes arsenic especially dangerous is that it doesn't have a taste or odor, so you can be exposed to it without knowing it.

While arsenic is naturally occurring, it also comes in inorganic (or “man-made”) formulas. These are used in agriculture, mining, and manufacturing.

Arsenic poisoning tends to occur most often in areas of industrialization, whether you work or live there. Countries that have high levels of arsenic-containing groundwater include the United States, India, China, and Mexico.

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Symptoms of arsenic poisoning may include:

- red or swollen skin
- skin changes, such as new warts or lesions
- abdominal pain
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhea
- abnormal heart rhythm
- muscle cramps
- tingling of fingers and toes

Long-term exposure to arsenic can cause more severe symptoms. You should seek emergency help if you experience any of the following after a suspected arsenic exposure:

- darkening skin
- constant sore throat
- persistent digestive issues

According to the [World Health Organization](#) , long-term symptoms tend to occur in the skin first, and can show up within five years of exposure. Cases of extreme poisoning may lead to death.

## The most common causes of arsenic poisoning

Contaminated groundwater is the most common cause of arsenic poisoning. Arsenic is already present in the earth and can seep into groundwater. Also, groundwater can contain runoff from industrial plants. Drinking arsenic-laden water over a long period of time can lead to poisoning.

Other possible causes of arsenic poisoning can include:

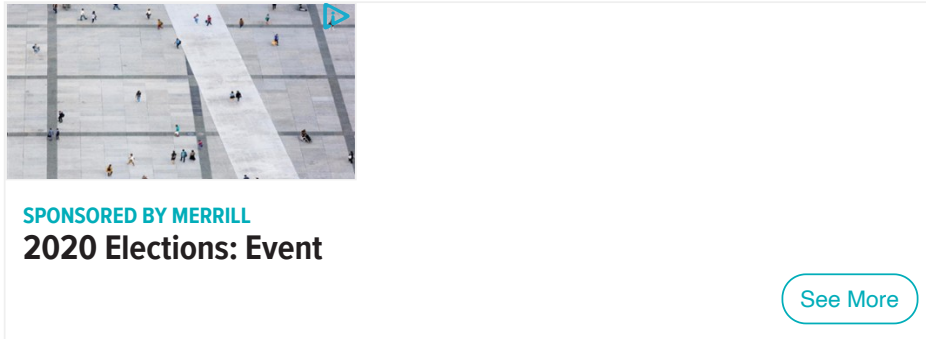
- breathing air that contains arsenic
- smoking tobacco products
- breathing contaminated air from plants or mines that use arsenic
- living near industrialized areas
- being exposed to landfill or waste sites

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- eating arsenic-contaminated food — this isn't common in the United States, but some seafood and animal products may contain small levels of arsenic

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## Diagnosing arsenic poisoning

Arsenic poisoning must be diagnosed by a doctor. This will not only help you get the proper treatment, but your doctor can also help you figure out the underlying cause so you can limit future exposure.

There are tests to measure high levels of arsenic in the body via the:

- blood
- fingernails
- hair
- urine

Urine tests are most commonly used in cases of acute exposure that has happened within a few days. According to the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), all other tests measure long-term exposure of at least six months.

The downside to any of these tests is that they can measure high amounts of arsenic in the body only. They can't determine any imminent adverse effects from exposure. Still, knowing whether you have high levels of arsenic in the body can help you make changes to your lifestyle, if needed.

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## Treatment for arsenic poisoning

There's no specific method used to treat arsenic poisoning. The best way to treat the condition is to eliminate arsenic exposure. Full recovery may not happen for weeks or months. It all depends on how long you've been exposed. The severity of your symptoms can also play a role.

[Vitamin E](#) and [selenium](#) supplements have been used as alternative remedies to limit the effects of arsenic exposure. It's thought that these substances cancel each other out. Still, more human studies are needed to support vitamin E and selenium as viable treatment methods.

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## Complications of arsenic poisoning

Long-term exposure to arsenic can cause cancer. The most common types of arsenic-related cancers are associated with the:

- bladder
- blood



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- lungs
- lymphatic system
- kidneys
- prostate
- skin

Arsenic poisoning may lead to other health complications. Diabetes, heart disease, and neurotoxicity are possible after prolonged exposure. In pregnant women, arsenic poisoning can lead to fetal complications or birth defects after delivery. Developmental effects can occur in children who are regularly exposed to arsenic.

## Outlook for arsenic poisoning



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outlook remains good overall. The most serious problems tend to occur from exposure to arsenic over long periods of time. This can happen at a daily job, or by eating or breathing contaminants on a regular basis. The earlier you catch arsenic exposure, the better the outlook. You can also reduce your cancer risk when you catch it early.

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## How to prevent arsenic poisoning

Ground water continues to be the most common source of arsenic poisoning. One of the most effective preventive measures against arsenic poisoning is to make sure you drink clean, filtered water. You can also make sure that all foods are prepared in clean water.

If you work in industries that use arsenic, take extra precautions. Bring

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