



# HPA Compendium of Chemical Hazards

## Dioxins (2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin)

### Key Points

#### Identity

- The term dioxins refers to a group of 75 compounds with similar chemical structures but greatly varying toxicity
- The most toxic dioxin is TCDD and most of the available data refer to this compound

#### Fire

- Not flammable
- Decomposes when exposed to UV light
- Emits toxic fumes of hydrogen chloride and chlorine when heated to decomposition or on exposure to UV light

#### Health

- Dioxins are toxic by inhalation or ingestion
- Ingestion of dioxins can lead to adverse effects on the skin, including chloracne, skin rashes or discolouration and excessive body hair
- High levels may give rise to changes in the blood and urine, liver damage or changes in hormonal levels
- Other effects of exposure to very high levels of dioxins include vomiting, diarrhoea, lung infections and damage to the nervous and immune systems
- TCDD is classified as a causing cancer in humans
- TCDD produces a range of toxic effects on reproduction relating to both fertility and developmental toxicity

#### Environment

- Avoid release into the environment
- Inform Environment Agency of substantial incidents

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2008  
Version 1

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# Dioxins (2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin)

## General information

### Key Points

#### **Identity**

- The term dioxins refers to a group of 210 compounds with similar chemical structures but greatly varying toxicity
- The most toxic dioxin is 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin (TCDD) and most of the available data refer to this compound

#### **Fire**

- Non flammable
- Decomposes when exposed to UV light
- Emits toxic fumes of hydrogen chloride and chlorine when heated to decomposition or on exposure to UV light

#### **Health**

- Dioxins are toxic by inhalation or ingestion
- Ingestion of dioxins in humans can lead to adverse effects on the skin, including a severe and persistent acne (chloracne), skin rashes or discolouration and excessive body hair
- Changes in the blood and urine, liver damage or changes in hormone levels may also occur
- Exposure to very high levels of dioxins may cause vomiting, diarrhoea, lung infections and damage to the nervous and immune systems
- TCDD is classified as causing cancer in humans
- TCDD produces a range of toxic effects on reproduction relating to both fertility and developmental toxicity in animals

#### **Environment**

- Avoid release into the environment
- Inform Environment Agency of substantial incidents

## Background

Dioxins are the general name for a group of 210 compounds of similar structures, which differ due to the amount of chlorine in the molecule and where the chlorine is bound. These compounds, known as polychlorinated dibenzo-dioxins and polychlorinated dibenzofurans, vary greatly in toxicity. Most of these compounds pose no threat to health at the levels commonly found in the environment but 17 of them are of more concern. The most toxic is 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin (TCDD). Dioxins are non-flammable, colourless solids or crystals at room temperature with no perceptible odour.

Dioxins may be formed during natural processes such as incomplete combustion – for example, during forest fires. Dioxins are not produced commercially, but very small amounts may be formed during the production of some solvents and when chlorinated organic matter and fossil fuels are burnt. Very small amounts may therefore be formed during industrial, domestic and municipal incineration. Small amounts are also released during metal smelting, processing and refining and during the use of chlorine for bleaching of pulp in paper mills.

Dioxins have been detected at low levels in cigarette smoke and motor vehicle emissions.



Dioxins can remain in the environment for a long time and soils and sediments, which are contaminated with dioxins, can release low levels back into the atmosphere.

However, dioxins can be broken down following exposure to UV light.

Dioxins have been found to be present in very small amounts in some food products including meat, dairy products and fish.

Dioxins are toxic by ingestion or inhalation. Most non-occupational exposure to dioxins is via ingestion through consumption of food contaminated with dioxins.

The principal adverse health effect of exposure to dioxins is a form of acne known as chloracne. This is a severe skin disease which mainly affects the face and upper body with acne-like spots that may be present many years after exposure. Exposure to high levels of dioxins may also cause rashes, redness, discolouration of the skin and excess body hair. Liver damage has been observed in individuals exposed to high levels of dioxins.



Children exposed to dioxins would be expected to display similar effects to those seen in exposed adults, although appear to be more sensitive than adults. Experiments in animals suggest that TCDD may reduce fertility and causes adverse developmental effects, particularly in the development of the male reproductive system. There is some evidence from mothers being exposed to dioxins due to the accidental release in Seveso, Italy, that the ratio of boys to girls being born was altered, and babies had thyroid problems.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified TCDD as causing cancer in humans. However, it has concluded that it is not possible to classify the other forms of dioxins as to their ability to cause cancer in humans.

### Production and Uses

#### Key Points

- Dioxins are not intentionally produced and they have no commercial use
- They may be formed naturally in small quantities from sources such as forest fires or bonfires
- Small amounts of dioxins may be released during combustion including cigarette smoke, vehicle emissions and waste incineration, as well as processes such as smelting and refining

Dioxins may be formed during natural processes such as incomplete combustion occurring during forest fires. They are not produced commercially, but small amounts may be formed as impurities during the production of certain chlorinated solvents and upon decomposition or combustion of chlorinated organic matter and fossil fuels. Small amounts of dioxins may therefore be formed during industrial, domestic and municipal incineration, and may also be released during metal smelting, processing and refining. Small amounts may also be formed during the use of chlorine for bleaching of pulp in paper mills.

Dioxins have been detected at low levels in cigarette smoke and motor vehicle emissions.

An industrial accident occurred in Seveso, Italy in 1976 in which high amounts of TCDD were accidentally released into the environment.

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### *What are dioxins?*

Dioxins is the general name for two groups of 210 compounds with similar structures known as polychlorinated dibenzo-dioxins and polychlorinated dibenzofurans, of which 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin (TCDD) is the most toxic. Dioxins are non-flammable, colourless solids or crystals at room temperature with no perceptible odour. Dioxins are not produced intentionally as they have no commercial use.

#### *How do dioxins get into the environment?*

Dioxins may be present naturally during forest fires and may be produced as by-products of industrial processes. Small amounts may also be formed during domestic, municipal and industrial incineration processes or from metal smelting and refining. Dioxins are also found in small quantities in cigarette smoke and vehicle emissions. Dioxins may be present in contaminated soils and sediments where they may remain for a long time without being broken down. Industrial accidents have occurred in the past, such as in Seveso, Italy in 1976 in which high amounts of TCDD were accidentally released into the environment. However, due to strict regulations this is unlikely to occur again.

#### *How will I be exposed to dioxins?*

The main way in which people are exposed to dioxins is by eating food contaminated with them. Food such as meat, dairy products and fish may contain dioxins in very small amounts. Dioxins may be inhaled if they are present in the atmosphere but this is a minor way people may be exposed compared to food.

#### *If there are dioxins in the environment will I have any adverse health effects?*

The presence of dioxins in the environment does not always lead to exposure. Clearly, in order for it to cause any adverse health effects you must come into contact with it. You may be exposed by breathing, eating, or drinking the substance or by skin contact. Following exposure to any chemical, the adverse health effects you may encounter depend on several factors, including the amount to which you are exposed (dose), the way you are exposed, the duration of exposure, the form of the chemical and if you were exposed to any other chemicals.

Dioxins vary in how poisonous they are from being highly toxic to virtually non-toxic. The most poisonous form of dioxin is TCDD. Many of the other dioxins are many times less toxic.

At the levels which occur in food and the environment, dioxins have no immediate effect on health if you are exposed for a short period of time. The potential risks to health come if you are exposed for a long period of time. Experiments in animals have shown that dioxins can affect the immune and reproductive system. It is therefore important that the intake of dioxins is below that safety limits (tolerable daily intake) and that levels in the environment remain low.

Very high concentrations of dioxins (usually TCDD), compared to normal environmental levels, can cause an acne-like condition known as chloracne. This is a severe skin disease that mainly affects the face and upper body with acne-like spots, which may last several years after the exposure. Chloracne is difficult to cure and can be disfiguring. Exposure to

high levels of dioxins may also cause rashes and redness, discolouration of the skin and an excess of body hair, as well as vomiting, diarrhoea, lung infections and damage to the nervous and immune systems. Liver damage has been observed in individuals exposed to high levels of dioxins. However, these effects have only been seen in cases of deliberate poisoning and, in the past, in people working with chemicals contaminated with dioxins, or following industrial accidents.

### *Can dioxins cause cancer?*

Dioxins can cause cancer in laboratory animals and there is evidence to suggest that exposure to dioxins at work in the past or following industrial accidents has been associated with an increase in the incidence of cancer in humans. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified TCDD as a chemical which can cause cancer in humans. However, the IARC decided that it was not possible to classify the other forms of dioxins as to their ability to cause cancer in humans.

### *Do dioxins affect children or damage the unborn child?*

Children are expected to be affected by dioxins in the same way as adults, although they may be more sensitive than adults.

Experiments on animals indicate that TCDD may reduce fertility and that exposure during pregnancy may produce adverse effects of the developing offspring. Provided that exposures to dioxins are below the recommended safety limits (tolerable daily intake) there would be no cause for concern.

### *What should I do if I am exposed to mixtures of dioxins?*

It is very unlikely that the general population will be exposed to a level of dioxins high enough to cause adverse health effects.

# Dioxins (2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin)

## Incident management

### Key Points

#### **Identity**

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#### **Fire**

- Not flammable
- Decomposes when exposed to UV light
- Emits toxic fumes of hydrogen chloride and chlorine when heated to decomposition or on exposure to UV light

#### **Health**

- Dioxins are toxic by inhalation or ingestion
- Ingestion of dioxins can lead to adverse effects on the skin, including chloracne, skin rashes or discolouration and excessive body hair
- High levels may give rise to changes in the blood and urine, liver damage or changes in hormonal levels
- Other effects of exposure to very high levels of dioxins include vomiting, diarrhoea, lung infections and damage to the nervous and immune systems
- TCDD is classified as a causing cancer in humans
- TCDD produces a range of toxic effects on reproduction relating to both fertility and developmental toxicity

#### **Environment**

- Avoid release into the environment
- Inform Environment Agency of substantial incidents

**Hazard Identification**

*Standard (UK) Dangerous Goods Emergency Action Codes*

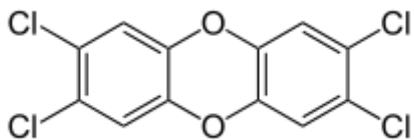
<b>UN</b>		Data not available
<b>EAC</b>		
<b>APP</b>		
<b>Hazards</b>	<b>Class</b>	
	<b>Sub risks</b>	
<b>HIN</b>		

UN – United Nations number; EAC – Emergency Action Code; APP – Additional Personal Protection; HIN - Hazard Identification Number

***Chemical Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply Classification***

<b>Classification</b>		Data not available
<b>Risk phrases</b>		
<b>Safety phrases</b>		

## Physicochemical Properties

<b>CAS number</b>	1746-01-6
<b>Molecular weight</b>	322
<b>Empirical formula</b>	C <sub>12</sub> H <sub>4</sub> Cl <sub>4</sub> O <sub>2</sub>
<b>Common synonyms</b>	Dioxin; TCDD
<b>State at room temperature</b>	Solid
<b>Volatility</b>	Vapour pressure negligible at 25°C
<b>Specific gravity</b>	1.8 at 20°C (water = 1)
<b>Flammability</b>	Non-flammable
<b>Lower explosive limit</b>	Not applicable
<b>Upper explosive limit</b>	Not applicable
<b>Water solubility</b>	Not soluble in water at 25°C. Low solubility in organic solvents
<b>Reactivity</b>	Decomposes when exposed to UV light
<b>Reaction or degradation products</b>	Releases toxic fumes of hydrogen chloride and chlorine upon decomposition by heating or exposure to UV light
<b>Odour</b>	Odourless
<b>Structure</b>	

References<sup>(a,b,c)</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Dioxins (HAZARDTEXT® Hazard Management). In: Klasco RK (Ed): TOMES® System. Thomson Micromedex, Greenwood Village, Colorado (accessed 02/2007).

<sup>b</sup> The Merck Index (14<sup>th</sup> Edition). Entry 9084: TCDD, 2006.

<sup>c</sup> The Dictionary of Substances and their Effects. Ed. S Gangolli. Second Edition, Volume 3, 1999.

**Threshold Toxicity Values**

<b>EXPOSURE VIA INGESTION</b>	
<b>mg</b>	<b>SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS</b>
-	Data not available

## Published Emergency Response Guidelines

### Emergency Response Planning Guideline (ERPG) Values

	Listed value (ppm)	Calculated value (mg m <sup>-3</sup> )
<b>ERPG-1*</b>	Data not available	
<b>ERPG-2**</b>		
<b>ERPG-3***</b>		

\* Maximum airborne concentration below which it is believed that nearly all individuals could be exposed for up to 1 hr without experiencing other than mild transient adverse health effects or perceiving a clearly defined, objectionable odour.

\*\* Maximum airborne concentration below which it is believed that nearly all individuals could be exposed for up to 1 hr without experiencing or developing irreversible or other serious health effects or symptoms which could impair an individual's ability to take protective action.

\*\*\* Maximum airborne concentration below which it is believed that nearly all individuals could be exposed for up to 1 hr without experiencing or developing life-threatening health effects.

### Interim Acute Exposure Guideline Levels (AEGs)

	ppm				
	10 min	30 min	60 min	4 hr	8 hr
<b>AEGL-1<sup>†</sup></b>	Data not available				
<b>AEGL-2<sup>††</sup></b>					
<b>AEGL-3<sup>†††</sup></b>					

<sup>†</sup> The level of the chemical in air at or above which the general population could experience notable discomfort.

<sup>††</sup> The level of the chemical in air at or above which there may be irreversible or other serious long-lasting effects or impaired ability to escape.

<sup>†††</sup> The level of the chemical in air at or above which the general population could experience life-threatening health effects or death.

## Exposure Standards, Guidelines or Regulations

### Occupational standards

<b>WEL</b>	LTEL(8 hour reference period): No guideline value specified
	STEL(15 min reference period): No guideline value specified

### Public health guidelines

<b>DRINKING WATER QUALITY GUIDELINE</b>	No guideline value specified
<b>AIR QUALITY GUIDELINE<sup>(a)</sup></b>	A guideline value was not proposed as direct inhalation exposures constitute only a small proportion of total exposure
<b>SOIL GUIDELINE VALUE AND HEALTH CRITERIA VALUES<sup>(b)</sup></b>	<b>Tolerable Daily Intake</b> <small>oral</small> 2 pg kg <sup>-1</sup> bw day <sup>-1</sup>
	<b>Mean Daily Intake</b> <small>oral</small> 126 pg day <sup>-1</sup>
	<b>Tolerable Daily Soil Intake</b> Adult: 0.4 pg kg <sup>-1</sup> bw day <sup>-1</sup> Child: 0.4 pg kg <sup>-1</sup> bw day <sup>-1</sup>

WEL – Workplace exposure limit; LTEL - Long-term exposure limit; STEL – Short-term exposure limit

<sup>a</sup> Air Quality Guidelines for Europe. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen WHO Regional Publications, European Series, No. 91, Second Edition, 2000.

<sup>b</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). Contaminants in Soil: Collation of Toxicological Data and Intake Values for Humans. Dioxins, Furans and Dioxin-Like PCBs, 2003.

## Health Effects

### *Major route of exposure<sup>(a)</sup>*

- Toxic by inhalation or ingestion.

### *Immediate signs or symptoms of acute exposure*

- In the case of ingestion, acute symptoms are unlikely.
- Adverse effects on the skin, including chloracne, skin rashes, discolouration or excessive body hair may occur some days after exposure.
- Exposure to high concentrations may give rise to changes in the blood and urine, liver damage or changes in hormonal levels, as well as vomiting, diarrhoea, lung infections and damage to the nervous and immune systems.

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TOXBASE - <http://www.toxbase.org>

<sup>a</sup> TOXBASE: Dioxins and furans – as ITEQ – SEPA, 2005.

## Decontamination and First Aid

### Important Notes

- Ambulance staff, paramedics and emergency department staff treating chemically-contaminated casualties should be equipped with Department of Health approved, gas-tight (Respirex) decontamination suits based on EN466:1995, EN12941:1998 and prEN943-1:2001 , where appropriate.
- Decontamination should be performed using local protocols in designated areas such as a decontamination cubicle with adequate ventilation.

### Dermal exposure<sup>(a)</sup>

- Remove patient from exposure.
- The patient should remove all clothing and personal effects.
- Double-bag soiled clothing and place in a sealed container clearly labelled as a biohazard.
- Brush away any adherent solid particles from the patient.
- Wash hair and all contaminated skin with copious amounts of water (preferably warm) and soap for at least 10-15 minutes. Decontaminate open wounds first and avoid contamination of unexposed skin.
- Pay special attention to skin folds, axillae, ears, fingernails, genital areas and feet.

### Ocular exposure<sup>(b)</sup>

- Remove patient from exposure.
- Remove contact lenses if necessary and immediately irrigate the affected eye thoroughly with water or 0.9% saline for at least 10-15 minutes.
- Patients with corneal damage or those whose symptoms do not resolve rapidly should be referred for urgent ophthalmological assessment.

### Inhalation

- Remove patient from exposure.
- Ensure a clear airway and adequate ventilation.
- Give oxygen to symptomatic patients.
- Apply other supportive measures as indicated by the patient's clinical condition.

### Ingestion

- Give oxygen to patients with respiratory symptoms.
- Apply other supportive measures as indicated by the patient's clinical condition.

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TOXBASE - <http://www.toxbase.org>

<sup>a</sup> TOXBASE: Skin decontamination – irritants, 1996.

<sup>b</sup> TOXBASE: Eye irritants, 2002.

# Dioxins

## (2,3,7,8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin)

### Toxicological overview

#### Key Points

##### *Identity*

- Polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-dioxins and polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-furans (“dioxins”) is a term used to refer to a group of 210 compounds with similar chemical structures
- Most of these compounds pose no health hazard at the levels commonly found but 17 of them are of more toxicological concern
- The most toxic dioxin is 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin (TCDD) and most of the available data refer to this compound

##### *Kinetics and metabolism*

- Dioxins are readily absorbed following ingestion and are also likely to be absorbed following inhalation or dermal exposure
- Once absorbed they are extensively distributed throughout the body, with particular accumulation in the liver and adipose tissue
- The metabolism of dioxins is extremely slow, with partial excretion in the faeces as metabolites. They are extremely persistent with the elimination half-life of TCDD being 7 to 12 years, therefore there is potential for accumulation in body tissues

##### *Health effects of acute exposure*

- The characteristic adverse effect following a severe acute exposure to dioxins is chloracne, the onset of which may be delayed several months
- Acute exposure to dioxins may also cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, hepatic damage and neurological effects

##### *Health effects of chronic exposure*

- The adverse effects of chronic exposure to dioxins are similar to those following acute exposure
- Chronic exposure to dioxins may also cause liver disease, increased risk of developing diabetes, alterations in thyroid function, impaired immune function, cardiovascular disease, mild neuropathies and developmental effects
- TCDD is classified by IARC as being carcinogenic to humans

## Toxicological Overview

### Summary of Health Effects

Dioxin is a term used to describe a group of closely related compounds with similar chemical structures but which vary greatly in their toxicity. These include 75 polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-dioxins and 135 polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-furans, the most toxic being 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin (TCDD). TCDD is the most extensively studied of the dioxins and most of the data in this document refer to TCDD.

Dioxins are well absorbed following oral exposure and undergo extensive distribution throughout body tissues, with particular accumulation in the liver and adipose tissues [1]. Dioxins are also expected to be well absorbed following inhalation and dermal exposure. Dioxins are not rapidly eliminated and are extremely persistent, the half-life of TCDD in humans is considered to be approximately 7 to 12 years [2]. Due to the extensive distribution and persistence of absorbed dioxins there is a high potential for accumulation following repeated exposure.

The most common adverse health effect observed in humans following acute exposure to dioxins, particularly TCDD, is the development of chloracne. Chloracne is an acne-like condition characterised by follicular hyperkeratosis which may include cysts and pustules and typically involves the hair follicles on the face and neck [1-3]. The onset of chloracne in individuals following acute exposure to dioxins may develop within months of exposure to relatively high levels. The delay in onset of chloracne is, however, dependent upon the duration and concentration of exposure. Mild cases of chloracne may clear several months post-exposure, however, in severe cases the lesions may be present 30 years after the initial onset [2]. Acute exposure to high levels of dioxins (particularly TCDD) may also cause nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea, hepatic damage and neurological effects, including headaches, weakness, muscular pains, peripheral neuropathy, loss of appetite, sexual dysfunction and transient weight loss [1, 2].

The adverse effects in humans of chronic or repeated exposure to dioxins are similar to those observed following severe acute exposure. Chloracne and alterations in hepatic enzyme levels have been seen in individuals occupationally exposed to dioxins [2, 3]. Other effects which have been reported include increased mortality from non-malignant liver disease, increased risk of developing diabetes, alterations in thyroid function, impaired immune function, increased mortality from cardiovascular disease, mild neuropathies and neurobehavioural effects in children [3].

TCDD is a reproductive and developmental toxin. There have been some reports to suggest that exposure to low levels of dioxins in the environment may cause subtle delays in development and alterations in thyroid function to the children of mothers exposed during pregnancy [3]. The most sensitive effect seen in toxicity studies in animals was developmental toxicity, the effects seen including induction of abortion, changes in behavioural and cognitive function and adverse effects on the developing male reproductive system [4]. The latter was the basis for the recommended Tolerable Daily Intake (TDI) [5].

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified TCDD as being carcinogenic to humans (Group 1). However, other polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-dioxins are not classifiable as to their carcinogenicity in humans (Group 3) [4]. This was based on limited evidence of induction of cancer from epidemiology studies in occupationally exposed workers, plus evidence that TCDD was a multi-site animal carcinogen and that the

mechanism of its toxicity was similar in humans and animals [4]. The weight of evidence from the available experimental studies indicates that dioxin is not a genotoxic agent [3].

### ***Introduction***

Dioxins is a term used to describe a group of 210 closely related compounds with similar chemical structures but varying greatly in their toxicity. They comprise 75 polychlorinated dibenzo-p-dioxins and 135 polychlorinated dibenzofurans. TCDD is the most toxic of the dioxins and is the most extensively studied. Most of the data in this document refer to TCDD.

Exposure to dioxins is most likely to be in the form of a mixture of related dioxin compounds with differing potency. Therefore, a system has been devised to consider the toxicity of a given mixture. The system is referred to as the 'toxic equivalent approach' and is based on weighting the individual compounds present in the mixture compared to the most potent compound (TCDD). This approach is recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and has been endorsed by the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) [2, 3].

### ***Kinetics and Metabolism***

Studies of the kinetics of dioxins following oral exposure have demonstrated that they are well absorbed and undergo extensive distribution throughout body tissues, with particular accumulation in the liver and adipose tissues [1]. A human volunteer study estimated the absorption of TCDD to be greater than 87% [2]. Dioxins are not rapidly eliminated and are extremely persistent, the half-life of TCDD in humans being approximately 7 to 12 years [2]. Due to the extensive distribution and persistence of absorbed dioxins there is a high potential for accumulation following repeated exposure. No data were available regarding the uptake of dioxins by inhalation in humans, however, data from animal studies suggest that dioxins are well absorbed following inhalation exposure [2]. No data were available on the absorption of dioxins following dermal exposure, but studies with structurally related chemicals suggest that dermal absorption is possible.

Relatively little is known about the metabolism of dioxins in humans, however, there is some evidence to suggest that absorbed TCDD may be slowly converted to polar metabolites that are eliminated as glucuronates [5]. Studies in animals suggest that the metabolism of absorbed dioxins is very slow, giving rise to its long elimination half-life [1, 2].

### ***Sources and Route of Exposure***

Dioxins are not deliberately manufactured. Low level exposure can occur from the presence of dioxins in combustion processes such as incineration of municipal waste, domestic fires and bonfires and internal combustion in automobile engines; as impurities in certain manufactured chemicals or during some industrial processes.

The greatest potential for occupational exposure to dioxins is to workers involved in the production, use and decomposition of materials which may contain small amounts of dioxins as impurities or from combustion processes in which dioxins may be formed. The major routes of occupational exposure to dioxins are by inhalation and by dermal contact [1, 2].

The most common source of non-occupational exposure to dioxins is from the ingestion of food products such as meat, dairy products and fish containing low levels of dioxins. Slightly higher levels may be found in foods from areas where pollution from certain organochlorine chemicals contaminated with dioxins may have occurred in the past [2].

The majority of studies on the effects of human exposure to dioxins have come from cases of accidental, occupational and residential exposure. In many of these cases there is little or no accurate exposure data, with no monitoring of exposure levels or internal doses [2].

## Health Effects of Acute / Single Exposure

### Human Data

#### General toxicity

The most common adverse health effect observed in humans following acute exposure to dioxins, particularly TCDD, is the development of chloracne. Chloracne is an acne-like condition characterised by follicular hyperkeratosis which may include cysts and pustules. Chloracne typically involves the hair follicles on the face and neck, but may also include the upper arms, back, chest, abdomen, outer thighs and genitalia [1-3]. Mild cases of chloracne may clear several months post-exposure; however, in severe cases the lesions may still be present 30 years after the initial onset [2].

Acute exposure to relatively high levels of dioxins (particularly TCDD) may give rise to effects including nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and transient weight loss. Neurological effects have also been commonly observed including headaches, weakness, muscular pains and peripheral neuropathy [1, 2]. Acute exposure to dioxins has also been associated with hepatic damage observed by alterations in enzyme levels such as increases in transaminase levels in the blood, hypercholesteraemia and hypertriglyceridaemia [1, 2, 4]. Sexual dysfunction has also been reported [1, 2].

The available case studies concerning human exposure to dioxins do not give accurate data regarding route or exposure concentration. However, the adverse health effects resulting from acute exposure to dioxins are expected to be similar whether by inhalation, ingestion or dermal exposure [2].

#### Delayed effects following an acute exposure

The onset of chloracne in individuals following acute exposure to relatively high levels of dioxins may develop within months of exposure, the delay in onset being dependent upon the duration and concentration of exposure. The delayed onset in adults has been shown to develop initially as irritative lesions within 20 to 40 days, which later develop into chloracne. The development of chloracne in an adult population in Seveso, Italy following an accidental release of TCDD was shown to range from 3 to 10 months post-exposure and its severity was shown to progressively decrease in the 2 years post-exposure. In children exposed to TCDD, the onset of chloracne was observed within 2 weeks and persisted between 8 and 26 months [2].

### Animal and In-Vitro Data

#### Ingestion

The oral toxicity of TCDD varies widely between species from an oral LD<sub>50</sub> of just 0.6 µg kg<sup>-1</sup> body weight (bw) in male Hartley guinea pigs, to relatively lower toxicity in the Syrian hamster with an oral LD<sub>50</sub> of 5051 µg kg<sup>-1</sup> bw. The oral LD<sub>50</sub> for TCDD in male Sprague Dawley rats is 43 µg kg<sup>-1</sup> bw. Death is delayed, occurring 2-3 weeks post exposure [2, 3].

A characteristic effect of TCDD toxicity in experimental animals following a single oral exposure is a significant reduction in body weight known as wasting syndrome and is the most common cause of death in experimental animals [2]. The wasting syndrome is

characterised by inhibition of gluconeogenesis, reduced feed intake and loss of body weight [6].

The liver is considered to be a principal target of toxicity for dioxins as adverse effects upon the liver have been observed in many experimental animal studies, including rats and mice following an acute oral exposure to TCDD [2]. Biochemical changes including hypoglycaemia and increased serum triglyceride and cholesterol levels were observed in Fisher 344 rats 10 days post-exposure to a single sub-lethal oral dose of TCDD, indicating hepatic damage. Histological changes including enlarged hepatocytes with centrilobular vacuolated cytoplasm and cellular degeneration in the centrilobular region have also been observed in rats following a single acute exposure to TCDD [2]. TCDD has also been shown to cause hepatomegaly in all species tested resulting from hypertrophy and hyperplasia of parenchymal cells [1].

Acute exposure of rhesus monkeys to a single oral dose of TCDD of  $70 \mu\text{g kg}^{-1}$  has been shown to induce dermal lesions resembling the chloracne observed in humans. The dermal effects included oedema and inflammation of the eyelids, loss of nails and loss of facial hair with the presence of acne-like lesions [1, 2].

Additional effects observed in animals administered a single acute oral dose of TCDD include atrophy of the thymus and also the spleen and lymph nodes [1, 2].

### **Inhalation**

No studies were available regarding the acute toxicity of dioxins in experimental animals following inhalation exposure.

### **Dermal / ocular exposure**

The information regarding acute dermal exposure of dioxins to experimental animals is limited. However, the dermal  $\text{LD}_{50}$  for TCDD in rabbits has been calculated at  $275 \mu\text{g kg}^{-1}$ , with death occurring 12-22 days post-exposure [2].

In the limited dermal exposure studies of TCDD, similar effects have been observed as those seen following oral exposure, including hepatic effects and decreased body weight. Dermal effects, including hyperkeratosis and epidermal hyperplasia, have been observed in hairless mice following dermal exposure to  $0.1 \mu\text{g kg}^{-1}$  TCDD [2].

## Health Effects of Chronic / Repeated Exposure

### Human Data

#### General toxicity

The adverse effects in humans following chronic or repeated exposure to dioxins are similar to those observed following severe acute exposure. Chloracne and alterations in hepatic enzyme levels have been seen in individuals occupationally exposed to dioxins. Positive correlations have been noted between serum and adipose levels of TCDD and increased risk of chloracne, hyperpigmentation and abnormal distribution of hair in occupationally exposed chemical production workers [2, 3]. Other effects that have been reported include increased mortality from non-malignant liver disease, increased risk of developing diabetes, alterations in thyroid function, impaired immune function, increased mortality from cardiovascular disease, mild neuropathies and neurobehavioural effects in children [3].

It is not possible to determine the concentration of TCDD or duration of exposure which gives rise to these adverse effects following chronic exposure since in most cases the data are limited [2].

In many cases of repeated exposure to TCDD resulting in the formation of chloracne, removal from the exposure will eventually result in the disappearance of the condition. However, due to the extremely long elimination half-life of TCDD, the condition may remain for 25 years or more [2].

#### Genotoxicity

Studies investigating chronic exposure of humans to either TCDD or other dioxin congeners have not reported any evidence of genotoxic effects [4]. No significant differences were reported in the incidence of chromosomal aberrations or sister chromatid exchange in exposed individuals, although there were limitations in the exposure data [2].

#### Carcinogenicity

The IARC summarised data from populations with the highest exposures to TCDD and suggested that there is strong evidence for increased risk of cancer at all sites combined, and some evidence for increased risk of specific cancers such as non-Hodgkins lymphoma, multiple myeloma or digestive system cancers, but commented that there was little consistency between studies [3, 4].

IARC concluded that there is limited evidence in humans for the carcinogenicity of TCDD but overall, classified it as being carcinogenic to humans (Group 1) [4]. When making this classification, the working group took into account the fact that TCDD is a multi-site carcinogen in experimental animals and that the mechanism involves the aromatic hydrocarbon (Ah) receptor protein, which regulates some specific gene expression associated with toxicity. Binding to this receptor is an integral part of the toxicological mechanism of a range of chemicals including dioxins. The Ah receptor is highly conserved and functions in the same way in humans as animals. In addition, the tissue concentrations were similar in the heavily exposed human populations showing increased cancer and the rat bioassay data [4].

Other polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-dioxins are not classifiable as to their carcinogenicity in humans (Group 3) [4].

### **Reproductive and developmental toxicity**

A number of studies have investigated the association between chronic exposure to TCDD and reproductive toxicity in humans. However, many of the studies lack adequate exposure data [2].

Most studies investigating the reproductive effects of exposure to dioxins in humans have involved paternal exposure to high doses although most are limited in their ability to detect any increases in specific birth defects. Exposure to dioxins has been suggested in some studies to cause alterations in hormone levels and sperm characteristics and, in some cases, an increase in the risk of spontaneous abortions was noted. In contrast, in other studies the evidence for this effect was not conclusive [4]. Data arising from the population exposed to dioxin following the Seveso industrial accident in 1976 indicated that the sex ratio of children born to parents living in the zone with the highest level of contamination was altered in favour of females. Such effects were seen in the births occurring from 9 months after the incident to 7 years later, with about twice as many children being female [6].

There have been some reports to suggest that exposure to low levels of dioxins in the environment may cause subtle delays in development and alterations in thyroid function to the children of mothers exposed during pregnancy. However, due to limitations of the data it was not possible to determine whether the effects were associated solely with dioxin exposure. However, a recent study on mothers exposed to the Seveso accident appears to confirm long last effects on the thyroid in their children [3].

### ***Animal and In-Vitro Data***

#### **Ingestion**

The adverse effects in animals following chronic exposure to dioxins are similar to those observed following severe acute toxicity. Chronic dietary exposure of Sprague-Dawley rats to  $0.1 \mu\text{g kg}^{-1} \text{day}^{-1}$  TCDD has been shown to give rise to a significant reduction in body weight (wasting syndrome), and increased mortality was reported in Swiss and B6C3F1 mice given  $0.36$  or  $1 \mu\text{g kg}^{-1} \text{day}^{-1}$  TCDD by gavage once a week for a year [2].

Additional effects resulting from repeated exposure to dioxins include reduced food intake, atrophy of the thymus, hypertrophy and hyperplasia of the hepatic, gastrointestinal and cutaneous epithelia, liver necrosis and gastrointestinal haemorrhage [2-4].

#### **Inhalation**

No studies were available on the chronic toxicity of dioxins in experimental animals following inhalation exposure [2].

#### **Genotoxicity**

The potential of TCDD to induce genetic mutation has been extensively studied in the Ames test *in vitro* using strains of *Salmonella typhimurium* and has been shown to be predominantly negative in these assays [2]. TCDD has also been investigated for genotoxic

potential in *in-vitro* systems using cultured mammalian cells. No evidence of unscheduled DNA synthesis (an indirect marker of DNA damage) was observed in cultured human cells. However, gene mutations were observed in mouse lymphoma cells and sister chromatid exchange was seen in Chinese hamster ovary cells [2]. The design of many of the studies was limited and inconclusive. However, TCDD does not appear to have direct-acting genotoxic potential *in vitro* as results were largely negative for a range of genotoxic endpoints [2, 4].

*In-vivo* animal studies carried out to investigate the genotoxic potential of TCDD have been found to be predominantly negative. Cytogenetic analysis of the bone marrow did not reveal any increase in the incidence of chromosomal aberrations in CD-COBS rats orally administered TCDD, but an increase was observed in Osborne-Mendel rats. No increase in the incidence of chromosomal aberrations was reported in the peripheral lymphocytes of monkeys exposed to TCDD for 4 years [2]. Data from *in-vivo* experimental studies suggest that TCDD or other dioxin congeners do not have mutagenic potential [2, 4]. The COM most recently reviewed the available mutagenicity data in 1999. They concluded that the weight of available experimental evidence continued to indicate that TCDD is not a genotoxic agent [7].

### **Carcinogenicity**

In three studies in which two strains of mouse were orally administered TCDD, an increase in the incidence of hepatocellular adenomas and carcinomas was observed in both the males and females. In one study an increase in the incidence of follicular-cell adenomas of the thyroid, lymphomas and subcutaneous fibrosarcomas was observed in the female mice, and an increase in the incidence of alveolar and bronchiolar adenomas or carcinomas was reported in male mice [4].

Low dose exposure to TCDD has been shown to cause tumours at multiple sites in rats and mice including the liver and thyroid gland [4]. In a comprehensive 2-year feeding study in the rat the top dose of  $100 \text{ ng kg}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$  clearly produced an increase in malignant liver tumours. The intermediate dose level,  $10 \text{ ng kg}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$  was considered to be the Lowest Observed Adverse Effect level (LOAEL) and the low dose level,  $1 \text{ ng kg}^{-1} \text{ day}^{-1}$  was considered not to cause any adverse effects [3].

IARC has concluded that there is sufficient evidence in experimental animals for the carcinogenicity of TCDD [4]. However, it also concluded that there is evidence to suggest that there is a lack of carcinogenicity in experimental animals for dibenzo-*p*-dioxin and there is inadequate evidence for the carcinogenicity of other chlorinated dibenzo-*p*-dioxins [4].

### **Reproductive and developmental toxicity**

Exposure to TCDD has been shown to cause reproductive and developmental toxicity in experimental animals [1-4].

Chronic administration of TCDD to rats in a three generation reproductive study caused significantly decreased fertility in the F<sub>1</sub> and F<sub>2</sub> generations, but not in the F<sub>0</sub> generation. Fetal anomalies, including cleft palate and kidney anomalies have been observed in the offspring of mice exposed to TCDD during pregnancy at doses below those required to cause fetotoxicity or maternal toxicity. The offspring of rats exposed to TCDD during pregnancy have displayed thymic atrophy and cell-mediated immune suppression at doses much lower than those required to cause maternal toxicity [3, 4].

Developmental toxicity is the most sensitive toxic effect of TCDD observed in animal studies. The effect on the developing reproductive system of the male rat fetus is considered to be the most sensitive indicator of TCDD toxicity [5, 6]. The COT estimated that reduced sperm count in the male offspring was occurring at TCDD body burden of  $33 \text{ ng kg}^{-1}$  in the mothers on day 16 of pregnancy [5].

### References

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This document will be reviewed not later than 3 years or sooner if substantive evidence becomes available.