



# Tetrachloroethylene (PCE)

Also known as perchloroethylene, PERC or tetrachloroethene.

## What is PCE?

Tetrachloroethylene (also known as PCE, PERC, perchloroethylene or tetrachloroethene) is a man-made chemical that is widely used for dry cleaning clothes and degreasing metal. It is also used to make other chemicals and can be found in some household products such as water repellents, silicone lubricants, spot removers, adhesives and wood cleaners. It easily evaporates (turns from a liquid to a gas) into the air and has a sharp, sweet odor. PCE is a nonflammable (does not burn) liquid at room temperature.

## How does PCE get into the environment?

PCE can evaporate into the air during dry cleaning operations and during industrial use. It can also evaporate into the air if it is not properly stored or was spilled. If it was spilled or leaked on the ground, it may find its way into groundwater.

People can be exposed to PCE in the environment from household products, dry cleaning products and from their occupation (work). Common environmental levels of PCE (called background levels) can be found in the air we breathe, water we drink and food we eat. In general, levels in the air are higher in the cities or around industrial areas where it is used more than rural or remote areas.



The people with the greatest chance of exposure to PCE are those who work with it. According to estimates from a survey conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), more than 650,000 U.S. workers may be exposed. However, the air close to dry cleaning businesses and industrial sites may have levels of PCE higher than background levels. If the dry cleaning business or industry has spilled or leaked PCE on the ground, there may be contaminated groundwater as well. Additionally, PCE that has leaked into the ground could rise as a vapor and enter buildings (vapor intrusion).

## What happens to PCE in the environment?

Much of the PCE that gets into surface waters or soil evaporates into the air. However, some of the PCE may make its way to the groundwater.

Microorganisms can break down some of the PCE in soil or underground water.

In the air, it is broken down by sunlight into other chemicals or brought back to the soil and water by

rain. PCE does not appear to collect in fish or other animals that live in water.



## How can PCE enter and leave my body?

PCE can enter your body when you breathe contaminated air or when you drink water or eat food contaminated with the chemical. If PCE is trapped against your skin, a small amount of it can pass through into your body. Very little PCE in the air can pass through your skin into your body. Breathing contaminated air and drinking water are the two most likely ways people can be exposed to PCE. How much enters your body depends on how much of the chemical is in the air, how fast and deeply you are breathing, how long you are exposed to it or how much of the chemical you eat or drink.

Most PCE leaves your body from your lungs when you breathe out. This is true whether you take in the chemical by breathing, drinking, eating or touching it. A small amount is changed by your body (in your liver) into other chemicals that are removed from your body in urine. Most of the changed PCE leaves your body in a few days. Some of it that you take in is found in your blood and other tissues, especially body fat. Part of the PCE that is stored in fat may stay in your body for several days or weeks before it is eliminated.

## Can PCE make you sick?

Yes, you can get sick from contact with PCE. But getting sick will depend upon:

- How much you were exposed to (dose).
- How long you were exposed (duration).
- How often you were exposed (frequency).
- General health, age, lifestyle: Young children, the elderly and people with chronic (on-going) health problems are more at risk to chemical exposures.

## How can PCE affect my health?

Exposure to very high concentrations of PCE (particularly in closed, poorly ventilated areas) can cause dizziness, headache, sleepiness, confusion, nausea, difficulty in speaking and walking, unconsciousness and even death. Skin irritation may result from repeated or extended contact with it as well. These symptoms occur almost entirely in work (or hobby) environments when people have been accidentally exposed to high concentrations or have intentionally used PCE to get a "high." Normal background levels (or common environmental levels) will not cause these health effects.

## Does PCE cause cancer (carcinogen)?

In the United States, the National Toxicology Program releases the *Report on Carcinogens* every two years. The *Report on Carcinogens* identifies two groups of agents: "Known to be human carcinogens" and "Reasonably anticipated to be human carcinogens."

PCE has been shown to cause liver tumors in mice and kidney tumors in male rats. There is limited evidence for the carcinogenicity of PCE in humans. PCE has been studied by observing laundry and dry-cleaning workers who may also have been exposed to other solvents, especially trichloroethylene (TCE), but also petroleum solvents.

The *Eleventh Report on Carcinogens* (RoC) has determined that PCE may reasonably be anticipated to be a carcinogen.

## Is there a medical test to show whether you have been exposed to PCE?

One way of testing for PCE exposure is to measure the amount of the chemical in the breath, much the same way breath-alcohol measurements are used to determine the amount of alcohol in the blood. Because PCE is stored in the body's fat and slowly released into the bloodstream, it can be detected in the breath for weeks following a heavy exposure. Also, PCE and trichloroacetic acid (TCA), a breakdown product of PCE, can be detected in the blood. These tests are relatively simple to perform but are not available at most doctors' offices and must be done at special laboratories that have the right equipment. Because exposure to other chemicals can produce the same breakdown products in the urine and blood, the tests for breakdown products cannot determine if you have been exposed to PCE or the other chemicals that produce the same breakdown chemicals.

## Has the federal government made recommendations to protect human health?

The EPA maximum contaminant level for the amount of PCE that can be in drinking water is 0.005 milligrams per liter of water (0.005 mg/L).

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommends that PCE be handled as a potential carcinogen and that levels in workplace air should be as low as possible.

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