

Alberta Health Acute Exposure Health Effects of Hydrogen Sulphide and Sulphur Dioxide

Acute Health Effects of Hydrogen Sulphide (H₂S)

Concentration H ₂ S in Air (ppm)	Description of Potential Health Effects
1	A noticeable odour that may be offensive to some individuals. People may temporarily experience mild symptoms of discomfort, including nausea, headache, and irritability due to the odour. Asthma symptoms may worsen.
10-20	An obvious offensive odour. Temporary eye irritation may occur after a single exposure and last several hours. Symptoms include mild itchiness, dryness, increased blink reflex and slight watering. Some people may experience headaches, nausea and vomiting. Symptoms of asthma, bronchitis or other forms of chronic respiratory disease may worsen.
50	A strong, intense offensive odour that may irritate eyes and breathing passages. Eyes may be itchy, stinging, and red with increased blinking, tearing and tendency to rub eyes. Breathing passages could feel tingly or sting, with increased tendency to clear throat and cough. Symptoms of pre-existing respiratory disease may worsen. No permanent injury to eyes or breathing passages is expected unless exposure is prolonged. Odour-sensitive individuals may experience headaches, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.
100	Initially there is a strong objectionable odour that lessens with prolonged exposure due to olfactory "fatigue." Eyes and breathing passages are often irritated within one hour of exposure. Eyes may be sore, stinging, burning, tearing, redness, swelling of eyelids, and possible blurred vision. Respiratory irritation may include sore throat, cough, soreness or stinging of breathing passages, and wheezing. The symptoms of asthma, bronchitis or other forms of chronic respiratory disease will worsen. Odour may cause headache, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.
250	There may or may not be an odour present due to olfactory paralysis. Eyes and breathing passages will become irritated within minutes of exposure, and the irritation will worsen with longer exposure. The outer surface of the eyes and inner eyelids will be inflamed, red and sore. Eyes will begin watering and tearing immediately and vision may be blurred. Eyes may be permanently harmed if exposure is prolonged. Respiratory irritation will include sore throat, cough, difficulty breathing, soreness of chest, and wheezing. Asthma symptoms will worsen. People may experience "systemic" effects, including headache, nausea and vertigo depending on duration of exposure.

Acute Exposure Health Effects of Hydrogen Sulphide and Sulphur Dioxide | 2

Concentration H ₂ S in Air (ppm)	Description of Potential Health Effects
500	No odour is present due to olfactory paralysis. Severe irritation and possible permanent injury to the eyes and breathing passages within 30 minutes of exposure. Lung and breathing passage damage may cause „chemical pneumonia“ following exposure if the exposure was prolonged. Systemic effects involving the central nervous system may occur within one hour of exposure and include headache, anxiety, dizziness, loss of coordination and slurred speech. People may lose consciousness or collapse suddenly, and die if exposure persists.
750	No odour is present due to olfactory paralysis. Central nervous system effects will be most obvious, and could include anxiety, confusion, headache, slurred speech, dizziness, stumbling, loss of coordination, and other signs of motor dysfunction. People may lose consciousness, collapse suddenly and possibly die, if exposure continues for more than a few minutes. Lung and breathing passage damage will likely cause „chemical pneumonia“ among survivors.
1000	Immediate “knock-down” and loss of consciousness. Death within moments to minutes. Immediate medical attention needed if victim is to survive.

Adapted from: Technical Advisory Committee on Public Health and the Oil and Gas Industry, Environmental Public Health Manual for Oil and Gas Activities in Alberta, 2007

Acute Health Effects of Sulphur Dioxide (SO₂)

Concentration SO ₂ in Air (ppm)	Description of Potential Health Effects
0.1	Transient bronchoconstriction ¹ in sensitive exercising asthmatic individuals that ceases when exposure ceases. ²
0.3 – 1	Possible detection by taste or smell.
0.75	Transient lung function changes in healthy, moderately exercising, non-asthmatic individuals.
1 – 2	Lung function changes in healthy non-asthmatics. Symptoms in asthmatics would likely increase in severity. There may be a shift to clinical symptoms from changes detectable only via spirometry.
3.0	Easily detected odour.
6 – 12	May cause nasal and throat irritation.
10	Upper respiratory irritation, some nosebleeds.
20	Definitely irritating to the eyes; chronic respiratory symptoms develop; respiratory protection is necessary.
50 – 100	Maximum tolerable exposures for 30 – 60 minutes.
greater than 100	Immediate Danger to Life (NIOSH recommendation).

¹ At low levels, bronchoconstriction was generally observed as changes in airway conductance detectable by spirometry rather than as clinical symptoms.

² It should be noted that clinical studies on humans are generally designed to elicit a response and consequently subject study volunteers to challenging conditions such as exercising, mouth breathing, cold, dry air, etc. Real-life responses in asthmatics should be viewed as being individual-specific dependent on severity of asthma, whether the individuals are medicated or not, how cold and/or dry the air is, mouth breathing (vs. nose-breathing, which can act as an effective scrubber mechanism), and exercise.

Adapted from: Technical Advisory Committee on Public Health and the Oil and Gas Industry, Environmental Public Health Manual for Oil and Gas Activities in Alberta, 2007

Contact us at 1-833-476-4743 or [submit a request online](#) at ahs.ca/eph.

PUB-0766-201206

©2012 Alberta Health Services, Safe Healthy Environments



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/). You are free to copy, distribute and adapt the work for non-commercial purposes, as long as you attribute the work to Alberta Health Services and abide by the other license terms. If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same, similar, or compatible license. The license does not apply to content for which the Alberta Health Services is not the copyright owner.

This material is intended for general information only and is provided on an “as is,” “where is” basis. Although reasonable efforts were made to confirm the accuracy of the information, Alberta Health Services does not make any representation or warranty, express, implied or statutory, as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness, applicability or fitness for a particular purpose of such information.