

Ricin

FACTSHEET

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What is Ricin?

Ricin is a toxin (poison) extracted from the castor bean plant which is available throughout the world. It can be made into a powder, mist or a pellet. It dissolves in water. It is not easily inactivated by cold or heat. It has been used medically for cancer treatments but must also be considered as a possible bioterrorism agent.

How could I be exposed to Ricin?

Ricin is not normally found in the air you breathe or food you eat. It would take a deliberate act by someone attempting to poison others for you to be exposed.

How could this happen?

Ricin could be dissolved into water or food and then swallowed or injected into the body. It could be made into a mist and then sprayed into the air we breathe. Any of these situations would introduce this poison into the body. Ricin eye and skin exposure could be by contact with the powder form of this poison. Ricin is poisonous but not contagious.

What are the Symptoms?

Symptoms vary depending on how this poison is introduced into the body and the dose received.

- Ricin swallowed in food or water would cause fever, headache, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and gastrointestinal bleeding. Symptoms usually occur within six hours.
- Ricin that was inhaled would result in respiratory distress (difficulty breathing) with fever, cough, nausea, and chest tightness. The lungs would begin to fill with fluid making breathing more difficult and the skin may turn blue. Symptoms would appear within eight hours.

- Ricin eye and skin exposure would result in redness and pain at the site of exposure.

It is important to seek medical treatment if you believe you have been exposed to Ricin. This poison can cause death. If you believe someone has swallowed Ricin **never** induce vomiting or give further fluids. Call 911 immediately.

How can I tell if I have been exposed to Ricin?

You may have these signs and symptoms with other illnesses and it does not necessarily mean you have been exposed to Ricin. However, if a large number of people, who have been close to one and other, become ill and have similar symptoms, such as described above then Ricin exposure would need to be considered.

Is a person exposed to Ricin contagious?

No, there is no person-to-person spread with Ricin.

Is there a vaccine for Ricin?

A vaccine is currently under development but is not yet available.

What steps should I take if I believe I have been exposed to Ricin?

You should move to an area of fresh air and remove your clothes as soon as possible. Wash the entire body with soap and water. Alert your local health officials of a possible exposure.

Removing your clothes – Take off all clothes worn. Do not pull clothing over the head; this may cause accidental inhalation of the ricin from your clothes. Cut any clothing off rather than pull over your head.

If you are assisting others to remove clothing, try to avoid touching any contaminated areas,

remove clothing as soon as possible and wash thoroughly.

Bathing – Use large amounts of soap and water to wash any Ricin from your skin. Rinse eyes for 10 to 15 minutes if you experience burning eyes or blurred vision. If you wear contacts remove them and place them with the contaminated clothing. **DO NOT** clean them and place them back in your eyes. Wash any eyeglasses thoroughly before placing back on your face.

Disposing of contaminated items – After bathing, place any contaminated item in a plastic bag, such as a large kitchen trash bag. Avoid touching the contaminated items. Wear gloves, if possible, and turn the bag inside out to grab the items. If gloves are not available use a stick, tongs or something other than your bare hands to place items in the bag. Anything that has touched these contaminated items should be placed into the bag and disposed of. Seal the plastic bag, placing it inside another bag and seal tightly closed. Public health officials will instruct you on the final disposal of the contaminated items.

How is Ricin exposure treated?

There are no specific treatments for Ricin exposure. The most important factors are to get to fresh air and to remove any Ricin from your body as soon as possible. Anyone ill with symptoms of Ricin poisoning is treated with supportive care (intravenous fluids, breathing assistance, medication to relieve fever and to support blood pressure, washing Ricin from the skin and eyes and flushing out the stomach). The type of supportive care given would depend on how the exposure occurred.

Want more information?

Information about Ricin and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842.

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