

Florida Department of Health Public Health Questions about the Radiation
Situation in Japan
March 18, 2011

Q. What is the public health risk in the United States from the radiation emergency in Japan?

The experts say there are currently no public health risks and none are expected in the United States. At this time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people in the United States refrain from taking potassium iodine (KI) supplements in response to the nuclear power plant explosion in Japan.

Source: CDC Key Messages for States, March 17, 2011

Q. What should I do if I think I have been exposed to radiation?

Contact your primary health care provider or the Poison Control Center Network. The number is 1 (800) 222-1222.

Q. What are the health risks and consequences of being exposed to radiation?

Effects of exposure to radiation depend upon the dose and the radioisotope. Cells can become damaged by radiation. Until the type of isotope, levels of contamination, and other factors are fully examined by experts, there is not enough information to predict the potential impacts of the radiation upon people and the environment.

Radiation can affect the body in a number of ways, and the adverse health effects of exposure may not be apparent for many years. These adverse health effects can range from mild effects, such as skin reddening, to serious effects such as cancer and death, depending on the amount of radiation absorbed by the body (the dose), the type of radiation, the route of exposure, and the length of time a person was exposed.

Radiation exposure does not necessarily translate into radiation poisoning. Radiation must be incorporated into the body in sufficient quantities before harmful effects occur.

Source: CDC <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/radiation/emergencyfaq.asp>

Q. Where can I learn more about the types of radioactive isotopes?

More information on the types of radioactive isotopes can be found at <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/radiation/isotopes/index.asp>

Q. How is exposure different from contamination?

A person who has been exposed to radiation has had radioactive waves or particles penetrate the body, like having an x-ray. A contaminated person is exposed to radiation released by the radioactive material on or inside the body.

Source: CDC <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/radiation/contamination.asp>

Q. What might my physician recommend I do to treat radiation sickness?

Potassium iodide is used to treat contamination from a certain form of radioactive material (radioactive iodine), and is only useful in a specific circumstances and for a short time window.

Florida stockpiles emergency supplies and pharmaceutical in the case of a nuclear emergency in Florida.

Q. What are potassium iodide tablets (KI) and when are they used during radiological emergencies?

Potassium iodide looks similar to table salt. It is also known as KI and is used by the thyroid gland to produce hormones. It can be taken during radiological emergency to protect the thyroid gland, but should not be taken unless directed by your primary health care provider or other designated health official.

Additional information about potassium iodine can be found via this link:
<http://www.doh.state.fl.us/environment/radiation/KI-fact-sheet.pdf>

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a fact sheet with basic information about KI. It explains what you should think about before you or a family member takes KI. It is available at:
<http://emergency.cdc.gov/radiation/ki.asp>

Potassium iodide tablets may be recommended to individuals who are at risk for radiation exposure or have been exposed to excessive radiation to block the body's absorption of radioactive iodine. Using potassium iodide when inappropriate could have potential serious side effects such as abnormal heart rhythms, nausea, vomiting, electrolyte abnormalities and bleeding.

Q. Should I be taking potassium iodide to protect myself?

At this time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that people in the United States refrain from taking potassium iodide (KI) supplements in response to the nuclear power plant explosion in Japan.

Consult with your primary health care provider about taking or changing any medications. Potassium iodide is only appropriate within a very close proximity to a nuclear event. Using potassium iodide when inappropriate could have potential serious health effects such as abnormal heart rhythms, nausea, vomiting, electrolyte abnormalities and bleeding.

Q. Can DOH explain what medicines Florida has in stock, how would they be distributed, and who would distribute them? Where will this medicine be distributed across the state?

Florida has potassium iodide and other pharmaceuticals strategically located around the state in case of a nuclear emergency. These pharmaceuticals would be distributed at either community reception centers or medical facilities as appropriate for the type of emergency.

Q. Does Florida stockpile supplies for such an emergency?

Florida does stockpile emergency supplies, including potassium iodide (KI) tablets. Potassium iodide tablets are not recommended at this time, and can present a danger to people with allergies to iodine, shellfish or who have thyroid problems. Potassium iodide tablets should not be taken unless directed by authorities.

Additional topics of interest and resources

- For non-Florida specific questions, please see the National JIC at nationaljic@dhs.gov
- For questions about the Governor's order to review Florida's nuclear power plants, please contact the Governor's Press Office at (850) 488-5394.
- The Division of Emergency Management is the lead agency during a natural or man-made emergency. For questions about protocol in Florida, please contact the Department of Emergency Management's press office at (850) 413-9969.

Q. Are there any protective measures I should take during in a radiological emergency?

It is important to remember, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, there is no risk to anyone in the United States at this time. The Environmental Protection Agency has permanent radiation monitoring stations on the West coast and additional stations have been set up in Hawaii. The EPA is keeping federal agencies informed.

Keep yourself and your family informed by obtaining accurate information. Know where to get the facts, such as from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and your state health department, rather than relying on unverified websites, where invalid information may spread quickly.

Follow the instructions of your local government's authorities after any emergency.

Q. Where can I find more information?

Nuclear Regulatory Commission Statement on Japanese Nuclear Power Plants:
<http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/news/2011/11-046.pdf>

Radiation Contamination and Exposure:
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/radiation/contamination.asp>

General Information About Radiation:
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/radiation/aboutradiation.asp>

Fact Sheets About Radiation: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/radiation/factsheets.asp>