



http://www.epa.gov/air/nitrogenoxides/health.html
Last updated on Wednesday, July 06, 2011

Nitrogen Dioxide

You are here: [EPA Home](#) [Air & Radiation](#) [Six Common Pollutants](#) [Nitrogen Dioxide](#) [Health](#)

Health

Current scientific evidence links short-term NO₂ exposures, ranging from 30 minutes to 24 hours, with adverse respiratory effects including airway inflammation in healthy people and increased respiratory symptoms in people with asthma.

Also, studies show a connection between breathing elevated short-term NO₂ concentrations, and increased visits to emergency departments and hospital admissions for respiratory issues, especially asthma.

NO₂ concentrations in vehicles and near roadways are appreciably higher than those measured at monitors in the current network. In fact, in-vehicle concentrations can be 2-3 times higher than measured at nearby area-wide monitors. Near-roadway (within about 50 meters) concentrations of NO₂ have been measured to be approximately 30 to 100% higher than concentrations away from roadways.

Individuals who spend time on or near major roadways can experience short-term NO₂ exposures considerably higher than measured by the current network. Approximately 16% of U.S. housing units are located within 300 ft of a major highway, railroad, or airport (approximately 48 million people). This population likely includes a higher proportion of non-white and economically-disadvantaged people.

NO₂ exposure concentrations near roadways are of particular concern for susceptible individuals, including people with asthma, asthmatics, children, and the elderly.

The sum of nitric oxide (NO) and NO₂ is commonly called nitrogen oxides or NO_x. Other oxides of nitrogen including nitrous acid and nitric acid are part of the nitrogen oxide family. While EPA's National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS) covers this entire family, NO₂ is the component of greatest interest and the indicator for the larger group of nitrogen oxides.

NO_x react with ammonia, moisture, and other compounds to form small particles. These small particles penetrate deeply into sensitive parts of the lungs and can cause or worsen respiratory disease, such as emphysema and bronchitis, and can aggravate existing heart disease, leading to increased hospital admissions and premature death.

Ozone is formed when NO_x and volatile organic compounds react in the presence of heat and sunlight. Children, the elderly, people with lung diseases such as asthma, and people who work or exercise outside are at risk for adverse effects from ozone. These include reduction in lung function and increased respiratory symptoms as well as respiratory-related emergency department visits, hospital admissions, and possibly premature deaths.

Emissions that lead to the formation of NO₂ generally also lead to the formation of other NO_x. Emissions control measures leading to reductions in NO₂ can generally be expected to reduce population exposures to all gaseous NO_x. This may have the important co-benefit of reducing the formation of ozone and fine particles both of which pose significant public health threats.