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Health effects of depleted uranium

Report by the Secretariat

1. The summary of the monograph on Depleted uranium: sources, exposure and health effects, referred to in paragraph 10 of document A54/19, is annexed. The complete monograph is available on request.

ANNEX

DEPLETED URANIUM: SOURCES, EXPOSURE AND HEALTH EFFECTS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This scientific review on depleted uranium is part of WHO's continuing process of assessment of possible health effects of exposure to chemical, physical and biological agents. Concerns about possible health consequences to populations residing in conflict areas where depleted uranium munitions were used have raised many important environmental health questions that are addressed in this monograph.

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The main purpose of the monograph is to examine health risks that could arise from exposure to depleted uranium; it is intended to be a desk reference providing useful information and recommendations to WHO Member States so that they may deal appropriately with the issue of depleted uranium and human health.

Information is given on sources of depleted uranium exposure, the likely routes of acute and chronic intake, the potential health risks from both the radiological and chemical toxicity standpoints and future research needs. Several ways of uptake of compounds with widely different solubility characteristics are also considered.

Information about uranium is used extensively because depleted uranium behaves in the body the same way as the parent element.

URANIUM AND DEPLETED URANIUM

Uranium is a naturally occurring, ubiquitous, heavy metal found in various chemical forms in all soils, rocks, seas and oceans. It is also present in drinking-water and food. On average, the human body contains about 90 µg of uranium derived from normal intakes of water, food and air; about 66% is found in the skeleton, 16% in the liver, 8% in the kidneys and 10% in other tissues.

Natural uranium consists of a mixture of three radioactive isotopes, which are identified by the mass numbers ^{238}U (99.27% by mass), ^{235}U (0.72%) and ^{234}U (0.0054%).

Uranium is used primarily in nuclear power plants; most reactors require uranium in which the ^{235}U content is enriched from 0.72% to about 3%. The uranium remaining after removal of the enriched fraction is referred to as depleted uranium. Depleted uranium typically contains about 99.8% ^{238}U , 0.2% ^{235}U and 0.0006% ^{234}U by mass.

For the same mass, depleted uranium has about 60% of the radioactivity of natural uranium.

Depleted uranium may also be produced in the reprocessing of spent nuclear reactor fuel. In these conditions another uranium isotope, ^{236}U , may be present together with very small amounts of the transuranic elements plutonium, americium and neptunium and the fission product technetium-99.

The increase in the radiation dose from the trace amounts of these additional elements is less than 1%. This is insignificant with respect to both chemical and radiological toxicity.

USES OF DEPLETED URANIUM

Depleted uranium has several peaceful applications: as counterweights or ballast in aircraft, radiation shields in medical equipment used for radiation therapy and containers for the transport of radioactive materials.

Owing to its high density, which is about twice that of lead, and other physical properties, depleted uranium is used in munitions designed to penetrate armour plate. It also reinforces military vehicles, such as tanks.

EXPOSURE AND EXPOSURE PATHWAYS

Individuals can be exposed to depleted uranium in the same way that they are routinely exposed to natural uranium – by inhalation, ingestion and dermal contact (including injury resulting in embedded fragments).

Inhalation is the most likely route of intake during or following the use of depleted uranium munitions in conflict or when depleted uranium in the environment is resuspended in the atmosphere by wind or other disturbances. Accidental inhalation may also occur as a consequence of fire in a depleted uranium storage facility, an aircraft crash or the decontamination of vehicles from within or near areas of conflict.

Ingestion could occur in large sections of the population if their drinking-water or food became contaminated with depleted uranium. In addition, the ingestion of soil by children is also considered a potentially important pathway.

Dermal contact is considered a relatively unimportant type of exposure since little of the depleted uranium will pass across the skin into the blood. However, depleted uranium could enter the systemic circulation through open wounds or from embedded fragments of depleted uranium.

BODY RETENTION

Most uranium (>95%) entering the body is not absorbed, but is eliminated in faeces. Of the uranium that is absorbed into the blood, about 67% will be filtered out by the kidneys and excreted in the urine in 24 hours.

Typically between 0.2% and 2.0% of the uranium in food and water is absorbed by the gastrointestinal tract. Soluble uranium compounds are more readily absorbed than insoluble ones.

HEALTH EFFECTS

Potentially, depleted uranium has both chemical and radiological toxicity, with the two important target organs being the kidneys and the lungs. Health consequences are determined by the physical and chemical nature of the depleted uranium to which an individual is exposed, and by the level and duration of exposure.

Long-term studies of workers exposed to uranium have reported some impairment of kidney function depending on the level of exposure. However, there is also some evidence that this impairment may be transient and that kidney function returns to normal once the source of excessive uranium exposure has been removed.

Insoluble inhaled uranium particles, 1-10 μm in size, tend to be retained in the lung and may lead to irradiation damage of the lung and even lung cancer if their presence results in a high enough radiation dose over a prolonged period.

Direct contact of depleted uranium metal with the skin, even for several weeks, is unlikely to produce radiation-induced erythema (superficial inflammation of the skin) or other short-term effects. Follow-up studies of veterans with embedded fragments in the tissue have shown detectable concentrations of depleted uranium in the urine, but without apparent adverse health consequences. The radiation dose experienced by military personnel within an armoured vehicle is very unlikely to exceed the average annual external dose from natural background radiation from all sources.

GUIDANCE ON CHEMICAL TOXICITY AND RADIOLOGICAL DOSE

For the different types of exposure the monograph gives the tolerable intake, namely, an estimate of the intake of a substance that can occur over a lifetime without appreciable risk to health. These tolerable intakes are applicable to long-term exposure. Single and short-term exposures to higher levels may be tolerated without adverse effects, but quantitative information is not available to assess by how much the long-term tolerable intake values may be temporarily exceeded without risk.

For the general public, the ingestion of soluble uranium compounds should not exceed the daily tolerable intake of 0.5 $\mu\text{g/kg}$ of body weight. Insoluble uranium compounds are markedly less toxic to the kidneys, and a daily tolerable intake of 5 $\mu\text{g/kg}$ of body weight is applicable.

Inhalation of soluble or insoluble depleted uranium compounds by the public should not exceed 1 $\mu\text{g/m}^3$ in the respirable fraction. This limit is derived from renal toxicity for soluble uranium compounds, and from radiation damage for insoluble uranium compounds.

Excessive worker exposure to depleted uranium via ingestion is unlikely in workplaces where occupational health measures are in place.

Occupational exposure to soluble and insoluble uranium compounds, expressed as an eight-hour time-weighted average, should not exceed 0.05 mg/m^3 . This limit is also based on both chemical effects and the consequences of radiation exposure.

RADIATION DOSE LIMITS

Radiation dose limits are prescribed for exposures above natural background levels.

For occupational exposure, the effective dose should not exceed 20 mSv/yr averaged over five consecutive years, or an effective dose of 50 mSv in any single year. The equivalent dose to the extremities (hands and feet) or the skin should not exceed 500 mSv in a year.

For exposure of the general public, the effective dose should not exceed 1 mSv in a year; in special circumstances, the effective dose can be limited to 5 mSv in a single year, provided that the average dose over five consecutive years does not exceed 1 mSv/yr. The equivalent dose to the skin should not exceed 50 mSv in a year.

ASSESSMENT OF INTAKE AND TREATMENT

For the general population, it is unlikely that the exposure to depleted uranium will significantly exceed the normal background uranium levels. When there is a good reason to believe that an exceptional exposure has taken place, the best way to verify this is to measure the concentration of uranium in the urine.

The intake of depleted uranium can be determined from the amounts excreted daily in urine. Depleted uranium concentrations are determined using sensitive mass spectrometric techniques; in such circumstances it should be possible to assess amounts that result in doses at the mSv level.

Faecal monitoring can give useful information on intake if samples are collected soon after exposure to depleted uranium.

External radiation monitoring of the chest is of limited application because it requires the use of specialist facilities and measurements need to be made soon after exposure for the purpose of dose assessment. Even in optimal conditions, the minimum doses that can be assessed are in the tens of mSv.

There is no suitable treatment for highly exposed individuals that can be used to reduce appreciably the systemic content of depleted uranium when the time between exposure and treatment exceeds a few hours. Patients should be treated based on the symptoms observed.

CONCLUSIONS: ENVIRONMENT

Only military use of depleted uranium is likely to have any significant impact on environmental concentrations of the isotope. Measurements of depleted uranium at sites where depleted uranium munitions were used indicate only localized contamination (within a few tens of metres of the impact site) at the ground surface. However, where the extent and type of contamination are such that there is a reasonable possibility of significant quantities of depleted uranium entering the water supply and food chain, food and ground water should be monitored and appropriate measures taken as for any heavy metal pollution. The WHO guidelines for drinking-water quality, 2 µg/l for uranium, would apply to depleted uranium.

Where possible, clean-up operations in impact zones in areas of conflict should be undertaken where there are substantial numbers of radioactive particles remaining and depleted uranium contamination levels are deemed unacceptable by qualified experts. Areas with very high concentrations of depleted uranium may need to be cordoned off until they are cleaned up.

Since depleted uranium is a mildly radioactive metal, restrictions are needed on the disposal of depleted uranium. There is the possibility that scrap depleted uranium could be added to other scrap metals for use in refabricated products. Disposal should conform to appropriate recommendations for use of radioactive materials.

CONCLUSIONS: EXPOSED POPULATIONS

Limitation on human intake of soluble depleted uranium compounds should be based on a daily tolerable intake of 0.5 µg/kg of body weight, and the intake of insoluble depleted uranium compounds should be based on both chemical effects and the radiation dose limits prescribed in the International Basic Safety Standards on radiation protection. Exposure to depleted uranium should be controlled to the levels recommended for protection against radiological and chemical toxicity outlined in the monograph for both soluble and insoluble compounds of depleted uranium.

General screening or monitoring for possible health effects related to depleted uranium in populations living in areas of conflict where depleted uranium has been used is not necessary. Individuals who believe they have been exposed to excessive amounts of depleted uranium should consult their medical practitioner for examination, appropriate treatment of any symptoms and follow-up.

Young children could receive greater depleted uranium exposure when playing within a conflict zone because of hand-to-mouth activity that could result in higher depleted uranium ingestion from contaminated soil. This type of exposure needs to be monitored and necessary preventive measures should be taken.

CONCLUSIONS: RESEARCH

Gaps in knowledge exist and further research is recommended in key areas that would allow better health-risk assessments to be made. In particular, studies are needed to clarify our understanding of the extent, reversibility and possible existence of thresholds for kidney damage in people exposed to depleted uranium. Important information could come from studies of populations exposed to naturally elevated concentrations of uranium in drinking-water.

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