

Symptoms and signs of arsenic exposure

- Changes to skin – (thickening of palms or soles of feet) and/or (speckling/pigmentation)
- Gastrointestinal symptoms (weight loss, nausea, alternating diarrhoea and constipation, and abdominal colic)
- Feeling weak, giddy or headaches, pins and needles in hands and feet

Avoiding further exposures

If your drinking water has been tested and results have confirmed levels of arsenic above the recommended drinking water standard, it is important to stop drinking the water.

The Health Protection team at Hawke's Bay District Health Board can assist with further advice. For example, depending on levels detected, you may still be able to use the water for washing, showering and bathing, as there is only limited absorption through the skin. Similarly water may still be suitable for the garden, just not vegetable gardens.

Assessing health risks:

People can swallow **small** amounts of arsenic every day for a long time without any obvious health effects.

The drinking water standard is set at the level someone drinking water every day for 70 years would have around 1 in 1700 additional risk of getting skin cancer. Risks would be higher for levels above the standard and lower for shorter periods of time.

How is arsenic absorbed?

Arsenic is not absorbed very well through the skin.

Arsenic does not usually accumulate (build up) in the body. It leaves the body in different ways:

- The arsenic we swallow, but that is not absorbed, leaves the body in the faeces (bowel motions/poo)
- Most of the arsenic absorbed by the body is passed out in urine (pee)
- Some of the arsenic is deposited inside the hair and nails, and leaves the body as the hair and nails grow.

Contacts:

Hawke's Bay District Health Board –On-Call Health Protection Officer: ph: (06)878 8109
Healthline: Freephone 24/7 to speak with a Registered Nurse on ph: 0800-611-116

Resources:

The Ministry of Health website has dedicated resources and information about arsenic and health. Go to <https://www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/environmental-health/hazardous-substances/arsenic-and-health>