Dear Alice,

After a night out with friends, I stopped in a nearby cafe before heading home to use the restroom. Unbeknownst to me, the staff had just mopped the restroom with bleach. Usually, a clean bathroom is a welcome amenity, but this one in particular is very small (barely a water closet) with zero ventilation. Though I was in there a brief time, my eyes and nose began to burn and water, and I could not very well open the door until it was time to wash my hands. It's been well over an hour since I inhaled all that bleach, and my eyes, nose, throat, and lungs all burn. I can't taste anything, and all I can smell is bleach. My head also hurts. I've gotten a lot of fresh air and plan to go back outside shortly, but these side effects have yet to abate. Am I in danger of respiratory damage? Is there anything specific to this situation I can do to alleviate the pain and discomfort?

Thanks for your help.

Signed,
Fuming

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**Answer**

Dear Fuming,

Sorry to hear you got burned from the bathroom! Although only a trained medical professional is able to assess possible damage to your respiratory system, your symptoms sound like they come from getting too much chlorine bleach and not enough air. It's also possible that the bleach was mixed with ammonia, which can make the resulting fumes even more irritating.

Because you were only in that bathroom for a short time, hopefully your symptoms will disappear in a few hours. In the meantime, you may experience wheezing or coughing while your lungs work to get rid of those fumes. As you've experienced, your chest may also burn a little, which is also normal after brief exposure to bleach fumes.

It may not immediately be clear whether you will suffer long-term effects from this incident. In severe cases, exposure to irritants in the nose and lungs can lead to a condition known as reactive airways dysfunction syndrome (RADS). RADS is considered a chemically-induced form of asthma that can last two to twelve years from the time you are exposed to the chemicals. Coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing, and tightness in the chest are some of
the symptoms of RADS.

Right after being exposed to these fumes, the best at-home action is getting fresh air. Try to ventilate your indoor living space as much as possible. You may want to consider spending a significant amount of time outside in the hours following breathing in the fumes. If after some time your symptoms still persist, you may want to contact Poison Control\(^2\) using their national hotline: 1-800-222-1222. Talking to a specialist about the details of what you are experiencing will help determine if you should visit the emergency room.

Whether or not you decide to visit the ER, if you continue to cough or feel otherwise uncomfortable, you may want to consider visiting your health care provider. Your health care provider can help treat your symptoms as well as warn you of any long-term effects that may result from your recent exposure.

Sorry again about your unfortunate bleach incident. Wishing you plenty of fresh, clean, soothing air,

Alice!

Category:
General Health\(^3\)
Miscellaneous\(^4\)

Related questions

- Asthma and special diet?\(^5\)
- Secondhand smoke, mainstream smoke, and side-stream smoke: Dangers and differences\(^6\)
- Toxic mold around the house\(^7\)
- Sucking nitrous oxide? Safer from balloons or canisters?\(^8\)

Resources

- Medical Services (Morningside)\(^9\)
- Medical Services (CUMC)\(^10\)

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