

Evaluation of Ethylene Oxide in Outdoor Air Near the Sterigenics Sterilization Facility in Cobb County, Georgia



You can use this fact sheet to

- Learn about the findings and recommendations in ATSDR's health consultation.
- Access ATSDR's educational resources to learn more about EtO exposures and health effects.

The full health consultation report is available on [ATSDR's Georgia health consultations page](#).

Background

Since 1967, the Sterigenics facility in Cobb County, Georgia, has used EtO to sterilize medical devices and other consumer products. In 2019, ATSDR was asked to conduct a health consultation to determine if EtO emissions from Sterigenics could harm public health. After the facility began operating with new emissions controls in April 2020, Sterigenics did not have a major influence on EtO concentrations in Cobb County.

What is EtO?

EtO is a colorless gas with no odor at levels found in communities. EtO is used to make several products, is found in tobacco smoke, and exists in nature in very small amounts. Low levels of EtO have been measured in the air in many areas of the United States without any known source; everyone is exposed to some EtO.

Breathing EtO over many years may increase your risk of developing hematopoietic cancers and breast cancer. Hematopoietic cancers include non-Hodgkin lymphoma, myeloma, and lymphocytic leukemia.

What did ATSDR find?

ATSDR evaluated EtO air sampling data collected by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division from September 2019 to October 2022. Sterigenics was shut down for the first several months of EtO air sampling and then reopened in April 2020 with a new emissions control system. There is no outdoor EtO air sampling available before Sterigenics temporarily shut down in September 2019. From our evaluation, ATSDR made three conclusions:

- For people who live, work, or attend school near Sterigenics now, and in the future, the risk of cancer from breathing EtO is similar to other areas of the country with no known source of EtO emissions. We refer to levels of EtO in communities with no known source as “background EtO.”
- People in Cobb County are not expected to have noncancer health effects from breathing EtO in the air near Sterigenics. This means breathing EtO near Sterigenics is not expected to cause other illnesses.
- Air sampling is not available for before September 2019, when Sterigenics closed to upgrade emissions controls. So, ATSDR cannot conclude if breathing EtO from Sterigenics before September 2019 could have harmed people’s health.

What does ATSDR recommend?

We recommend that everyone have routine medical checkups and age-appropriate health screening tests, including mammograms and other recommended cancer screenings. ATSDR encourages you to talk to your doctor about your health concerns. You can provide [ATSDR’s Clinician Brief on Ethylene Oxide](#) to your doctor to inform them about EtO exposure.

We recommend that the United States Environmental Protection Agency continues to improve analysis methods to accurately measure EtO at lower concentrations and investigate other sources of EtO emissions that contribute to background EtO concentrations.

How can I get more information about EtO and Sterigenics?

You can learn more about ATSDR’s work related to EtO at <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/programs/ethylene-oxide.html>.

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) has information on the Sterigenics air permit, air monitoring, and more: <https://epd.georgia.gov/sterigenics>.

Georgia EPD has a report summarizing Georgia EPD findings on air monitoring in Georgia available from their EtO webpage: <https://epd.georgia.gov/ethylene-oxide-information>.

Where can I get more information about ATSDR’s health consultation?

Email EtO@cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO and ask for information on the health consultation “Evaluation of Ethylene Oxide in Outdoor Air, Sterigenics Facility, Cobb County, Georgia.”