Understanding Gases

Hydrogen Cyanide

HCN

Hydrogen cyanide is released from some raw and unprocessed edible plants when they are damaged or digested by the body.

Notable examples are the kernels of apricots, wild “bitter” almonds and black cherries; bamboo shoots; lima beans and cassava.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) advises against eating raw, unprocessed apricot kernels, bitter almond kernels and powdered forms of them.

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HCN is not used domestically but is released from several combustion processes, these include smoke from cigarettes, house and other fires or from car exhaust fumes.

What is Hydrogen Cyanide?

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What are the applications of Hydrogen Cyanide?

Hydrogen cyanide is an important industrial chemical with over a million tonnes being produced globally each year. HCN has many uses such as the manufacture of paints, plastics, synthetic fibres (i.e. nylon) and other chemicals being its primary use. It also has uses in metal cleaning, gardening, ore-extraction, electroplating, dying, printing and photography.

What are the dangers?

Hydrogen cyanide is very toxic, as it prevents the body from using oxygen properly. Early signs of exposure to hydrogen cyanide include headache, a feeling of sickness, dizziness and confusion. With substantial exposure having the ability to rapidly lead to unconsciousness, fitting, coma and possibly death.

What should you do if you are exposed?

The presence of hydrogen cyanide in the environment may not always lead to exposure. You may be exposed through breathing, eating, or drinking the substance or by skin or eye contact with HCN. Following exposure to any chemical, the adverse health effects that may follow depend on several factors.

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