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The Long-Term Impact of Chlorine Exposure

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | September 29, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Chlorine exposure from pools, tap water, and cleaning products forms byproducts such as chloramines and trihalomethanes, which research has associated with skin, eye, and airway irritation
- Even low-level chlorine exposure has been associated with respiratory symptoms and skin irritation in occupational and swimming-pool research
- Chlorine reacts with chemical sunscreens to form chlorinated byproducts whose toxicity is largely uncharacterized, and it strips protective oils from skin and hair during swimming
- Pre-swimming protection includes applying barrier moisturizers like pure lanolin or tallow, and rinsing with clean water beforehand
- High-quality whole-house water filtration, choosing saltwater pools over conventionally chlorinated ones, and showering promptly after swimming are practical steps that can lower how much chlorine you encounter

Everywhere you turn, chlorine is part of your environment, quietly embedded in your drinking water, shower steam, pool systems, and the cleaning products under your sink. It's praised for its germ-killing power and assumed to be harmless in small doses. But the research on repeated, low-level contact is more nuanced than that — and there is a good deal you can do about it.

From the outside, chlorine looks like it's doing its job: disinfecting, sanitizing, and sterilizing. But inside your body, it interacts with delicate tissues in ways researchers have linked to oxidative stress, irritation of your lungs and skin, and (in the case of its reaction byproducts) open questions about hormone signaling. You might brush off a sore throat after scrubbing a bathroom or chalk up itchy skin to “pool chemicals,” but those are worth paying attention to rather than ignoring.

People who work around chlorine, like lifeguards, janitors, and health care staff, often don't realize how much cumulative contact a workday involves. Casual swimmers and children also report symptoms that seem unrelated at first, from cough to recurring skin rashes. Moreover, household tap water and cleaning routines add to the total exposure picture.

Understanding where chlorine exposure happens, how it affects different tissues and what habits make it worse is the first step to protecting your health. What you'll see next are the ways this chemical interacts with your body — what the evidence supports, where it is thinner than headlines suggest, and the straightforward changes that reduce your exposure.

What the Research Links Chlorine to in Skin, Lungs, and Hormones

Chlorine exposure has been associated with several forms of irritation, and not only dry skin. Chlorine doesn't stay stable in water — it reacts with organic materials like sweat, skin cells and urine to form **toxic byproducts** such as chloramines and trihalomethanes, which your body absorbs through your skin or inhales during swimming.[1]

- **Chlorine byproducts are the focus of airway research —** Indoor pools are a particular problem. Chloramines accumulate in the air when ventilation is poor, making you breathe them in deeply with every stroke. These airborne compounds irritate the airways, and occupational studies have reported increased airway reactivity among people with sustained exposure.

Reactive airways dysfunction syndrome (RADS), an asthma-like condition, has been documented in the toxicological literature — though the cases described there followed acute high-concentration incidents rather than routine pool use. The telltale "chlorine smell" is a practical signal that chloramines have built up in the air and ventilation is inadequate.

- **Even brief exposure to pool water has been associated with eye irritation —** A 2020 cross-sectional study of 96 swimmers aged 15 to 35 years old at a single university pool in Lampung, Indonesia, found that swimming for more than 15 minutes was associated with roughly 2.9 times the odds of eye irritation.[2] Swimmers exposed to chlorine concentrations above the local regulatory standard had about 4.6 times the odds.

  Because this is a single-site cross-sectional study, it shows association rather than cause, and the authors note that chlorine levels vary with dosing procedure, bacterial load, and weather.[3] These effects are generally attributed to chlorine disrupting away the protective tear film on your eyes, leading to symptoms like redness, burning, and blurry vision.

- **Your hair and skin take a hit after every swim —** Chlorine can affect the skin's barrier function, and people with eczema or sensitive skin appear to be more susceptible. A 2003 comparative study in The Journal of Dermatology immersed the forearms of 20 patients with atopic dermatitis and 10 control subjects in 40 degrees Celsius water at 0, 0.5, 1.0, and 2.0 mg/L residual chlorine.

  Water-holding capacity of the stratum corneum (the outermost layer of the epidermis) decreased significantly at 0.5 mg/L or higher in the atopic group. In the controls, the effect appeared only at 2.0 mg/L. The study measured barrier hydration, not inflammation, and the authors suggest chlorine may play a role in exacerbating atopic dermatitis.[4] The result is more itching, redness, and even flares of eczema or pool-related dermatitis.

Your hair isn't immune either — chlorine is hard on it. Chlorine binds to hair proteins like keratin and dissolves the natural sebum that keeps your hair strong and shiny.[5] This leaves strands brittle, dry, and prone to breakage and split ends. Blonde hair is especially vulnerable, often turning green due to the oxidation of copper in pool water.

- **Chlorine reacts with sunscreen to create byproducts of largely unknown toxicity —** In a 2020 paper published in Environment International, researchers noted that chlorine reacts with avobenzone (a common ingredient in **chemical sunscreens**) creating chlorinated phenols and acetophenones (acetylbenzene compounds).[6]

  Note that this was a laboratory chemical analysis — gas chromatography–mass spectrometry work plus samples from two Slovenian pools — and it identified more than 60 byproducts.

  Here, the authors state plainly that "the toxicity of the majority of these products remain unknown," while noting that chlorinated phenols and acetophenones are recognized as relatively toxic. Bacterial luminescence testing showed the chlorinated mixtures were more toxic than unreacted avobenzone.[7]

- **Chloramines, more than chlorine itself, are the harder problem —** While chlorine itself is a strong disinfectant, it's the compounds formed when it reacts with organic matter that account for much of the irritation research. These secondary byproducts are more likely to be inhaled or absorbed, and they don't dissipate quickly — especially in indoor pools with stagnant air. That makes ventilation and post-swim rinsing more useful levers than most people assume.

What the Toxicological Profile Reports at the Cellular Level

According to the Toxicological Profile for Chlorine from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), chlorine is classified as a highly reactive and corrosive gas that damages tissue on contact.[8]

Even short bursts of high exposure cause immediate injury to your respiratory tract. For people working in water treatment, public sanitation, pool maintenance, or chemical manufacturing, the risk is especially relevant. Swimming or bathing in chlorinated water contributes at much lower concentrations.

- **What the profile does and does not conclude about long-term low-dose exposure** — The ATSDR profile is more cautious than most secondary coverage of it.

  On chronic low-to-moderate exposure it states that "the preponderance of the evidence suggests that no serious long-term respiratory alterations result from acute exposure to low to moderate (up to approximately 20 ppm) concentrations of chlorine gas," and its long-term occupational studies showed no clear dose-response relationship for respiratory endpoints.[9]

  The profile does document persistent findings at the higher end: airflow obstruction and increased bronchial reactivity in some studies, and bronchial hyperresponsiveness persisting up to 30 months after accidental high-concentration releases. Occupational "gassing" studies found a higher prevalence of obstructive patterns and airway hyperresponsiveness.

  Overall, the honest summary is that the evidence is mixed, stronger for repeated higher-concentration exposures than for everyday low-level contact, and that this is an argument for reducing avoidable exposure rather than for alarm.[10]

  Hospital janitors, gym staff, university maintenance crews, and those working in sewage or water treatment are among the most regularly exposed groups.[11] Unlike people who choose to swim, these workers often handle chlorine directly, clean with it, or breathe it in from treated surfaces and air systems without adequate protection.

- **Chlorine reacts readily with moist tissues in your eyes, mouth and lungs** — When inhaled, chlorine reacts with water to form hydrochloric and hypochlorous acids, both corrosive. The ATSDR profile documents this chemistry in water directly; its

application to the respiratory tract is described there as a proposed mechanism rather than a confirmed one.

What is well-documented clinically is the symptom picture: burning sensations, coughing, chest tightness, and, in some cases, delayed-onset breathing difficulties.

- **Your airways are the first line of contact —** The ATSDR notes that damage often begins in your upper airways, with irritation of your nose and throat, then spreads to the tiny air sacs where oxygen exchange happens. In the more severe exposure cases the profile describes, recovery of symptoms did not always mean full recovery of function; RADS persisted for months in some patients. These outcomes are documented after significant exposures, not after routine swimming.

  In some of these studies, exposed individuals showed heightened airway responses — lungs that react to small irritants like dust or cold air. The pattern resembles asthma without an allergic trigger. The ATSDR profile also records studies that found no such effect, so this should be read as a documented possibility at meaningful exposure levels rather than an established consequence of everyday contact.

- **Unlike many pollutants, chlorine doesn't just enter your body; it forms new compounds along the way —** Chlorine doesn't float passively through your system. Once inhaled or absorbed, it chemically transforms into reactive species that can stress the tissues they contact.

  The ATSDR profile documents that chlorine oxidizes tissue sulfhydryl groups in the respiratory mucosa, and that antioxidant pretreatment reduced lung injury in an animal study — both consistent with oxidative stress playing a role.

  It is worth adding bioenergetic context, though. Oxidative stress of this kind is one of the pathways through which environmental exposures are thought to erode mitochondrial energy production, and cellular energy output is the foundation your body repairs and defends itself from. That is the practical reason to reduce an avoidable chemical load rather than absorb it daily.

- **The most severe cases occur when chlorine is mixed with other common chemicals —** A key risk outlined in the report involves household or industrial settings where chlorine is accidentally mixed with ammonia or acidic cleaners.

  This produces chloramine gas, a highly dangerous compound that can cause rapid-onset respiratory distress and, at high concentrations, respiratory failure. This is the one scenario that is a genuine emergency rather than a cumulative-exposure concern — never mix bleach with ammonia-based or acidic cleaners.

  Many people clean their homes with bleach-based products in closed spaces like bathrooms or kitchens. Without fans or open windows, that gas accumulates quickly. Ventilation is the simple fix, and it matters most in small, enclosed rooms.[12]

Simple Swim Habits That Protect Your Skin from Chlorine Damage

Coach Slava Fattakhov, a former professional swimmer and coach, published a step-by-step skin protection guide on his website designed for swimmers, families and anyone regularly exposed to pool water. Note that the guide is practical experience rather than clinical research, so treat it as coaching advice.[13] His goal is clear: help people swim often without sacrificing their health.

- **Hydrating your skin before swimming makes it less absorbent to pool chemicals —** Coach Slava recommends rinsing your body with clean, chlorine-free water before entering the pool — not just for hygiene, but to protect your skin. This initial rinse saturates your skin cells with clean moisture, which he reasons leaves less capacity to take up chlorinated water. While the mechanism is plausible, it hasn't been formally tested, but the habit only costs a couple of minutes either way.

- **Using a barrier cream or natural oil helps seal in moisture —** Applying a layer of protection before swimming helps. Coach Slava suggests coconut, jojoba, or sweet almond oil. I suspect pure lanolin or tallow would perform better. Either one forms a

physical layer between your skin and the water and slows chlorine's ability to strip your natural oils. Lanolin is wool-derived, so skip it if you have a known wool-alcohol sensitivity.

- **Getting chlorine off quickly is one of the most important steps —** Right after your swim, rinse thoroughly with fresh water. Chlorine keeps reacting with your skin even after you leave the pool, so washing it off promptly limits how long that continues. The sooner you rinse, the less contact time chlorine has with your skin barrier.

- **Locking in moisture after your swim speeds up recovery —** Post-shower, apply a thick, nourishing moisturizer while your skin is still damp. Pure lanolin is a good choice here, and tallow works well, too. Both help restore your skin's barrier function and retain hydration. This is especially important for frequent swimmers or anyone with dry or aging skin.

- **Stay hydrated inside and out to maintain healthy skin —** Internal hydration matters as well. Drinking pure, filtered water before and after swimming supports overall skin hydration, and well-hydrated skin generally tolerates irritants better than dry skin does.

Simple Ways to Protect Your Body from Chlorine Exposure

If chlorine exposure is drying out your skin, interfering with your breathing or making your eyes sting every time you swim, it's time to change your routine. Whether you're a swimmer, a parent of water-loving children or someone working around chlorinated environments, these steps will help you take control.

The good news is that chlorine exposure is one of the more controllable environmental variables in daily life. A handful of changes cut most of it out, and none of them are expensive or complicated. Here's what I recommend:

1. **Switch to a saltwater pool or skip indoor pools entirely —** Chlorine exposure hits hardest when it's concentrated and trapped, like in a steamy indoor pool. That “chlorine smell” is chloramines building up in the air.

   Saltwater systems generate chlorine from salt electrolytically rather than dosing it in directly, which typically means lower free-chlorine levels and less chloramine odor — but they still produce chlorine and its byproducts, so they reduce exposure rather than eliminate it. If you have the option, outdoor saltwater pools are a much easier choice for your lungs, skin and eyes.

2. **Apply pure lanolin as a pre-swim skin barrier —** If you're going to be in chlorinated water, coat your skin with pure lanolin or tallow first. Both create a thick, natural barrier, and both are preferable to petroleum jelly. This step helps hold moisture in and puts a physical layer between chlorinated water and your skin. If you've reacted to wool products before, use tallow rather than lanolin.

3. **Install a whole-house water filter to reduce chlorine at home —** You're not just exposed to chlorine in pools — it's also in your shower and tap water. That said, a high-quality whole-house filtration system can remove chlorine before it reaches your skin or lungs.

   Inhaling chlorine steam during hot showers is a frequently overlooked route of exposure, since hot water volatilizes chlorine and the bathroom is usually the smallest, least-ventilated room in the house.

4. **Rinse off before and after swimming —** Always rinse with clean, fresh water before getting into the pool. Hydrated skin absorbs less chlorine. After you're done, shower immediately using a natural, fragrance-free cleanser. Then, moisturize while your skin is still damp to lock in hydration. This two-step rinse routine reduces chlorine's contact time and minimizes its irritating effects.

5. **Avoid chemical sunscreens —** Chlorine reacts with certain sunscreen ingredients like avobenzone to form chlorinated byproducts whose toxicity is largely uncharacterized. If you want sun protection while in the water, a natural mineral-

based sunscreen is the better option. Clothing works too.

FAQs About Chlorine Exposure

Q: What are the long-term effects of chlorine exposure?

A: Long-term exposure to chlorine has been associated with irritation of the lungs, skin, and eyes, and occupational research has reported higher rates of airway reactivity and asthma-like conditions among heavily exposed workers.

Q: Where does chlorine exposure commonly happen?

A: Most people encounter chlorine through swimming pools, tap water, household cleaning products and workplaces like hospitals, gyms, and water treatment facilities. Indoor pools and poorly ventilated cleaning areas are especially risky because chloramines build up in the air where ventilation is inadequate.

Q: How does chlorine harm my body at the cellular level?

A: Once chlorine contacts moist tissues in your eyes, lungs, or skin, it forms corrosive acids that irritate and can injure cells. Toxicological data also point to oxidative stress — chlorine oxidizes sulfhydryl groups in respiratory tissue, and antioxidants reduced injury in animal work.

Oxidative stress of this kind is one of the pathways through which environmental exposures are thought to burden mitochondrial energy production, which is why lowering an avoidable chemical load is worth the small effort it takes.

Q: What steps can I take to protect myself from chlorine?

A: Use pure lanolin or tallow as a barrier on your skin before swimming. Shower with filtered water and moisturize immediately after. Avoid chemical sunscreens and use a high-quality whole-house filtration system to reduce chlorine in your drinking water and shower. Whenever possible, choose saltwater pools or swim outdoors, and never mix chlorine-based cleaners with other products.

Q: Who has the highest risk for chlorine-related health issues?

A: People working in sanitation, pool maintenance, hospitals, and gyms face the highest cumulative exposure, along with frequent swimmers and children. Anyone exposed to chlorine regularly, especially in poorly ventilated environments, should take steps to minimize contact and support skin, lung, and overall health.

None of this needs to keep anyone out of the water — swimming is excellent movement, and outdoor swimming pairs it with the sun exposure your mitochondria depend on. The goal is to enjoy it while keeping the chemical load low.

This article is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Consult a qualified health care provider before making changes to your health regimen.

Sources and References

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