

How to Protect Your Children from Arsenic-Treated Wood at School, Child Care or Preschool: A Safety Checklist for Parents



Since the 1970's, arsenic has been widely used to treat wood for common outdoor structures such as playground equipment, picnic tables, park benches, backyard decks, fences, and landscaping timbers. Arsenic is linked to skin, bladder, and lung cancer as well as diabetes and a host of other health problems.

Arsenic is known to leach to the surface throughout the lifecycle of the wood and can easily end up on the hands of anyone who touches it. Young children are at increased risk of cancer from arsenic exposure when they touch the wood and then put their hands in their mouths. Through this common activity, children can ingest (swallow) arsenic. In addition, acute (immediate) arsenic poisoning can result if the wood is not handled properly. Arsenic is even more dangerous when it is inhaled than when ingested. Avoid sawing or sanding this type of wood because it creates a fine arsenic-laden dust. Never burn the wood since this releases arsenic as a toxic gas and creates a highly toxic ash.

For more information about arsenic-treated wood and how to protect yourself and your family, visit the **Safe Playgrounds Project's website** at www.safe2play.org or call the toll-free hotline 1-877-604-KIDS.

To evaluate the safety of your child's school, childcare, or preschool, please check (✓) each question that you have answered and proceed to the next one.

1. **Are there outdoor wood objects (play set, picnic table, bench, fence, sand box, wood chips, etc.) at your child's school, childcare, or preschool?** Focus on the outdoor wood structures or items that children touch regularly.
2. **Is the wood structure made of Arsenic-treated wood?**
 - Ask the school administrator (or facilities/operations staff) for written documentation specifying the materials used for the structure.
 - Or try to identify the manufacturer and call the company directly.
 - Or find out who the builder/installer is and contact them.
 - If none of the above methods work, the structure should be tested. (It is difficult to visually identify arsenic-treated wood after it has been in use for a while. Refer to <http://www.safe2play.org/FAQ.html>, Question 22.)

If the structure is made of arsenic-treated wood:

3. **Have the structure and the ground cover (soil, wood chips, etc.) beneath it been tested for arsenic?** Ask to see the test results. If it has not been tested, you can test the structure yourself with a simple and affordable home test kit, available at www.safe2play.org.
4. **Does the school have plans to replace the structure and the area directly beneath it with an environmentally safer alternative?** The best long-term solution is to remove or replace the arsenic-treated wood structure and any contaminated ground cover beneath it. Make sure the school notifies parents and staff about when the removal will take place. Find out what the arsenic-treated wood will be replaced with and when will it be installed.

Safety Checklist for Parents
The Safe Playgrounds Project, Center for Environmental Health

5. **If the school is removing or replacing the structure, how are they disposing of the arsenic-treated wood and any contaminated soil?** Protect your community by bringing arsenic-treated wood to either a hazardous waste disposal area or a lined municipal landfill (and request that it be stored and separated from recyclable lumber). Arsenic-treated wood disposed of at a regular landfill may be mistaken for untreated lumber and recycled into wood chips or mulch. See California Health & Safety Code 25150.7 and 25150.8 for more information about state disposal laws. (Go to <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw.html>)
6. **Has the school been regularly sealing the arsenic-treated wood?** Ask what they are sealing the structure with and how often it is done. The California Health & Safety Code 115775 specifies that public play structures made of arsenic-treated wood must be sealed with non-toxic and non-slippery sealant at least every two years. A solid or semi-transparent oil-based outdoor deck stain is recommended for sealing the structure once a year.
7. **Are the school staffs informed of handling precautions for the arsenic-treated wood structure?** Find out if school staffs know what precautions to take in order to minimize risks to children and themselves. Find out if the maintenance staff knows how to safely handle (clean, repair, or remove) arsenic-treated wood.

If the school administration is unresponsive:

- Contact your local PTA or other parents groups to discuss the issue.
- If there are no existing parents groups, contact the other parents yourself, starting with the parents that you know.
- Contact local non-profits, community organizations, or environmental and social justice groups to see what networks exist and if any are working on this issue.
- Test the structure yourself with a home test kit.
- Arrange a meeting with the school administration.
- Refer to the Safe Playgrounds Project fact sheet ("What You Should Know about Arsenic-Treated Wood") and Frequently Asked Questions at www.safe2play.org or call 1-877-604-KIDS.

8. Other steps you can take:

- a. Share your results with us at www.safe2play.org or 1-877-604-KIDS!
- b. Learn about other health and safety issues at your child's school. Go through the "Back To School Environmental Checklist," located at www.besafenet.com/checklist.pdf.
- c. Ask the school board to pass a resolution for a healthy, environmentally sound school. Get a sample resolution at www.greenschools.net.

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