

Chemical Threats

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Every time I read the newspaper or listen to the news on the television and hear about more Sarin attacks around the world, I get especially curious and become prone to investigate this particular nerve agent in more detail. I am not going to go into the long scientific nomenclature for this chemical agent however it will be sufficed to state that it is an odorless and colorless liquid which is soluble in water. This fact alone makes this compound a lethal nerve agent which is extremely toxic.

Another name for Sarin is GB and it was developed first as a pesticide and later employed as a chemical weapon primarily because of its potency to act as a nerve agent. The UN has classified Sarin as a weapon of mass destruction. In April of 1997 the production of this chemical agent was forbidden by the Chemical Weapons Convention. Even if deployed in very low concentration, Sarin can still pose a deadly hazard. The direct inhalation will result in death within a matter of 10 minutes maximum as the victim's experience suffocation as a result of lung muscle paralysis. Atropine has been known to act as an antidote if administered quickly. Failure to obtain the antidote immediately could result in permanent neurological damage. The initial symptoms from exposure consist of

a runny nose, tightness within the chest along with constriction of the pupils. Within a short time of the exposure the victim will experience difficulty breathing and have bouts of nausea and drooling. In its final stages the victim will lose complete control of all body functions.

Sarin attacks the nervous system by degrading the neurotransmitter acetylcholine causing death as a result of asphyxia from the victim's inability to control the breathing muscles. It takes anywhere from several weeks to a few months for Sarin to degrade to a safe level. CIA records have stated that some examples of Sarin discovered in Iraq had a shelf life of merely several weeks. Another interesting fact concerning Sarin is that if this chemical gets on a person's clothing it will release Sarin gas for about 30 minutes. Sarin is noted to be at least 26 times more deadly than the chemical cyanide.

One of the more frequent items mentioned in conversations concerning Sarin is the event which happened at Disneyland in 1995 when a letter and video was received by the park officials. At that time federal agents began rushing to the park after the threat was received stating that terrorists had planned to initiate a lethal gas attack on the park grounds. Less than a month after the infamous Sarin attack in Japan, the threat was made in America and aimed at Disneyland. With fears of another calamity similar to the one which took place in Japan earlier, prompted the dispatch of special units to the theme park. This group of professionals was composed of both civilian scientists and physicians employed by the CDC. The police that were assigned to the task were issued special chemical warfare gear and gas masks to ensure their safety. Every visitor was searched as they entered the park.

In the meantime, the police in Japan arrest over 100 Aum Shinri Kyo members from the subway attack in that country. With the same thought in mind the American authorities suspected a similar event at Disneyland. Although nothing actually developed from the threat, I was really disappointed in the management at Disneyland for refusing to shut the entertainment center down. Of course, security was intensified at the amusement park but all potential threats relating to WMD or in this case chemical weapons must be taken seriously. I can only conclude that with the Disney management refusing to close the business that they failed to take the threat seriously and needlessly risked the lives of the public that came to their park. To me this was totally unacceptable. I would hope that something was learned by this event and in the future all possible threats would be based upon public safety and credibility.