Exposure of workers to a mixture of toluene and xylenes. II Effects

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Accepted for publication 19 April 1993

Abstract

The health effects of exposure to a mixture of toluene and xylene isomers was studied on the fourth or fifth days of a working week in factories in China. The study population comprised 233 subjects (122 men and 111 women), who were exposed to the time weighted geometric mean (maximum) concentrations of toluene (3 (203) ppm) and xylenes (4 (103) ppm). For comparison, 241 non-exposed controls (116 men and 125 women) were recruited from the same regions. The prevalence of some subjective symptoms significantly increased in the exposed population, and the symptom profiles were similar to those found after exposure to toluene or xylenes alone. Haematology and serum biochemistry did not show notable changes. It seems reasonable to conclude that the effects of the toxicities of toluene and xylenes in combination are additive.

(*Occup Environ Med* 1994;51:47-49)

Toluene (methylbenzene) and xylenes (three isomers of dimethylbenzene) are often present in combination in organic solvent preparations.¹⁻³ Many reports from various countries have been published on exposure of workers,⁴⁻¹¹ or of the general population.^{12,13} Whereas the toxicity of toluene has been extensively studied, reports on the health effects of xylenes alone are few; publications of the effects of toluene-xylene combinations on factory workers are rare, despite their wide use.

More than 200 workers exposed to toluene and xylenes in combination were examined in our study and compared with a similar number of non-exposed controls in a search for possible effects on the central nervous system, as well as haematological and serum biochemical effects. The lack of metabolic interaction between the solvents is reported separately.¹⁴

Materials and methods

SELECTION OF WORKERS AND DESIGN OF HEALTH EXAMINATION

The study was carried out in China on the

fourth or fifth day of a working week.¹⁴ The criteria of selection were that (1) the workers participated in the whole examination (personal diffusive sampling,¹⁵⁻¹⁷ analysis of urine for monitoring of exposure, a questionnaire, haematology, and serum biochemistry for examination of effects on health), and (2) exposure was almost exclusively to toluene and xylenes (>90%), but not toluene alone (no more than 90% toluene¹⁸), xylenes alone (not more than 70% xylenes¹⁹), or gasoline.

It was not possible beforehand to identify the workers who met the criteria. Accordingly, almost 1000 exposed workers were examined, of whom 233 subjects (122 men and 111 women) satisfied the two selection criteria. Some of them were exposed also to a few ppm ethylbenzene, but none was exposed to benzene.¹⁴ Non-exposed controls of 116 men and 125 women were recruited from the clerical sections of the same factory or factories in the same regions. Table 1 shows that there was no significant age difference between the sexes or between exposed and non-exposed populations. ($p > 0.05$ for both). Most exposures were low¹⁴ with less than 10 ppm (geometric mean) for the sum of all exposures, although some workers were exposed to toluene and xylenes in excess of the current occupational exposure limit of 100 ppm of each.²⁰⁻²²

Health examination both for the exposed and for the non-exposed persons consisted of (1) interview by a doctor or a public health nurse for medical history and completion of questionnaires, (2) blood sampling for haematology and serum biochemistry for liver and kidney functions, (3) collection of urine for clinical urinary analysis by diagnostic kits, and (4) clinical examination (for details, see Ukai *et al*¹⁸). Urine samples for metabolite analyses were collected at the end of the shift and on another separate occasion.²³ The questionnaire has 12 questions on the symptoms during work and 57 questions (two additional questions for women on menstruation) for the past three months (when not at work).^{24,25} The prevalence of the subjective symptoms was calculated after Ukai *et al*¹⁸ as: the number of affirmative answers by the group/(the number of the people in the group) $\times$ (number of questions) $\times$ 100 (%).

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Significant differences in prevalences were tested for with the χ^2 test, in means with a *t* test (one tailed) and in distribution with the Mann-Whitney U test.

Table 1 Mean (y) age of exposed and control workers

Workers	Men (SD, n)	Women (SD, n)	Men and women (SD, n)
Exposed	30.9 (8.0, 122)	31.9 (7.2, 111)	31.4 (7.6, 233)
Controls	33.8 (9.2, 116)	31.8 (7.1, 125)	32.8 (8.3, 241)

Table 2 Prevalence of subjective symptoms

Subjective symptoms	Sex	No of questions	Controls	Exposed to toluene and xylenes		
				Total	1-20 ppm	>21 ppm
During work	Men	12	71 (116):5.1	274 (122):18.7**	226 (91):20.7	48 (31):12.9
	Women	12	44 (125):2.9	336 (111):25.2**	285 (90):26.4	51 (21):20.2
	Total		115 (241):4.0	610 (233):21.8**	511 (181):23.5	99 (52):15.9
In past three months	Men	57	404 (116):5.9	884 (122):12.3**	769 (91):14.3	115 (31):6.3
	Women	59	540 (125):7.3	1218 (111):18.6**	1056 (90):19.9	162 (21):13.1
	Total		944 (241):6.6	2102 (233):15.3**	1825 (181):17.1	277 (52):9.0

* $p < 0.01$ v controls.

Values in the table are number of affirmative answers (number of subjects):percentage prevalence.

Table 3 Frequency distribution of subjective symptoms

Subjective symptoms	Sex	Controls				Exposed			
		I	II	III	VI	I	II	III	IV
During work	Men	85	22	9	0	23	74	19	6
	Women	104	17	4	0	18	52	26	15
	Total	189	39	13	0	41	126	45	21
In past three months	Men	20	91	5	0	13	83	18	8
	Women	16	97	12	0	6	55	36	14
	Total	36	188	17	0	18	138	54	22

 $p < 0.01$ by χ^2 test in all cases.

Values in the table are number of persons; categories I, II, III, and IV were 0, 1-3, 4-6, and 7 or more symptoms during work, and 0, 1-10, 11-20 and 21 or more symptoms in past 3 months.

Table 4 Symptoms with significant difference ($p < 0.01$) in percentage prevalence (%) for men and women combined

Code No	Symptom	Control (C)	Exposed (E)	E/C
During work:				
1	Eye irritation	6.2	28.6	4.6
2	Dimmed vision	3.1	22.2	7.2
3	Nasal irritation	8.3	28.2	3.4
5	Sore throat	5.2	40.2	7.7
6	Unusual taste	0.4	14.2	35.5
7	Face flushing	2.1	8.6	4.1
8	Dizziness	2.8	14.1	5.0
9	Floating sensation	7.9	55.1	7.0
11	Heavy feeling in the head	2.4	14.1	5.9
12	Headache	6.9	32.9	4.8
In the past 3 months:				
4	Nausea	8.6	26.5	3.1
6	Difficulty in sleeping	18.2	38.5	2.1
7	Nightmare	13.8	28.2	2.0
13	Forgetfulness	16.8	42.7	2.5
14	Inability to concentrate	3.4	18.0	5.3
18	Fainting after sudden standing up	27.5	50.9	1.9
19	Palpitation	11.0	26.9	2.4
24	Poor appetite	3.8	16.7	4.4
26	Dry mouth	7.9	39.7	5.0
51	Rough skin	2.4	21.4	8.9

Code for each symptom is as in Yin *et al.*²⁵

Table 5 Comparison of haematology and serum biochemistry values

Item (Unit)	Men		Women	
	Exposed	Controls	Exposed	Controls
No of subjects	116	122	125	111
Haematology:				
Haemoglobin (g/100 ml)	14.8 (1.1)	14.8 (1.3)	12.7 (1.5)	12.5 (1.1)
Leucocytes ($\times 10^3/\text{mm}^3$)	6.70 (1.76)	6.46 (1.65)	6.31 (1.63)	6.34 (1.73)
Serum biochemistry:				
Total protein (g/100 ml)	7.35 (0.51)	7.34 (0.40)	7.54 (0.53)	7.48 (0.46)
Total bilirubin (mg/100 ml)	0.57 (0.29)*	0.67 (0.47)	0.51 (0.26)*	0.57 (0.29)
γ -GTP (IU/l)	8.8 (1.60)*	10.2 (1.69)	5.9 (1.70)	6.4 (1.75)
ASAT (IU/l)	22.5 (1.38)	21.5 (1.41)	18.8 (1.38)	18.7 (1.38)
ALAT (IU/l)	23.9 (1.77)	22.1 (1.94)	15.4 (1.84)	14.7 (1.83)
ALP (IU/l)	260 (1.39)	254 (1.34)	202 (1.37)	206 (1.35)
LAP (IU/l)	48.9 (1.21)	47.1 (1.15)	42.1 (1.17)	41.2 (1.17)
Creatinine (mg/100 ml)	0.90 (0.12)*	0.87 (0.11)	0.71 (0.12)**	0.66 (0.09)

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.Values for haemoglobin, leucocytes, total protein, total bilirubin and creatinine are arithmetic mean (ASD), whereas those for γ -GTP, ASAT, ALAT, ALP, and LAP are geometric mean (GSD) with assumptions of normal and log normal distributions, respectively.

Results

PREVALENCE OF SUBJECTIVE SYMPTOMS

Table 2 shows that the prevalence of symptoms during work was significantly ($p < 0.01$) higher in the exposed than in the control group regardless of sex. This was also true for the prevalence of the symptoms in the past three months. As the response to two questions related to menstruation did not differ between exposed and control groups, the two sexes were combined after the exclusion of these questions.

When both exposed and non-exposed subjects were classified by the number of symptoms per person, the frequency distribution was significantly ($p < 0.01$) different for both symptoms during work and in the past three months (table 3).

Table 4 gives prevalences for each symptom with a significant increase ($p < 0.01$) in the exposed population. Most of the symptoms during work related depressive effects on the central nervous system (such as codes 9 and 11) or local irritation (codes 1, 3, and 5), whereas those in the past three month period were less specific. The exposed to control ratio (E/C) ranged from 35.5 to 3.4 for the work period and 8.9 to 1.9 for the past three months and was significantly higher ($p < 0.05$ by U test) in the work period than in the past three months.

For the detection of possible dose dependency, exposed workers were classified into two subgroups by exposure intensities of 1 to 20 ppm and 21 ppm or more. Comparison of prevalences indicated no dose dependent increase either during work or in the past three months (table 2).

HAEMATOLOGY AND SERUM BIOCHEMISTRY

Table 5 shows the results of haematology and serum biochemistry tests. Because haemoglobin concentrations are known to be different in the two sexes the findings were treated separately for men and for women. Differences between exposed and control groups were not significant for most of the items, and none of the statistically significant differences were clinically relevant.

Discussion

The health examination of 233 Chinese solvent workers occupationally exposed to a mixture of toluene and three xylene isomers at low concentrations and 241 controls showed that the prevalences of some subjec-

tive symptoms were significantly increased in the study population. The symptom profiles were similar to those found after occupational exposure to toluene¹⁸ or xylenes,¹⁹ and focused on depression of the central nervous system and local irritation. In agreement with other observations,^{26,27} haematology and serum biochemistry did not show noteworthy changes: this was also the case for workers exposed to toluene¹⁸ or xylenes.¹⁹

The toxicity profiles are essentially the same for toluene, xylenes, and the mixture of the two, the central nervous system being the primary target. This suggests that it is justified when evaluating the toxicity of mixtures of toluene and xylenes at such low levels of occupational exposure, to add the effects.²⁰ The current occupational exposure limits for toluene and three xylene isomers are set at 100 ppm²⁰⁻²² indicating that their potencies are essentially equal in their ability to depress the central nervous system.

We thank Professor C Jin of the Institute of Occupational Medicine, Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, Beijing, China, Professor T Suzuki (the former Director), and Professor K Yoshinaga of Tohoku Rosai Hospital, Sendai 980, Japan for their support to this study.

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