

Nitrate and nitrite in drinking-water

Background document for *development* of
WHO *Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality*

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Preface

One of the primary goals of the World Health Organization (WHO) and its Member States is that “all people, whatever their stage of development and their social and economic conditions, have the right to have access to an adequate supply of safe drinking water”. A major WHO function to achieve such goals is the responsibility “to propose ... regulations, and to make recommendations with respect to international health matters”

The first WHO document dealing specifically with public drinking-water quality was published in 1958 as *International Standards for Drinking-water*. It was subsequently revised in 1963 and in 1971 under the same title. In 1984–1985, the first edition of the WHO *Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality* (GDWQ) was published in three volumes: Volume 1, Recommendations; Volume 2, Health criteria and other supporting information; and Volume 3, Surveillance and control of community supplies. Second editions of these volumes were published in 1993, 1996 and 1997, respectively. Addenda to Volumes 1 and 2 of the second edition were published in 1998, addressing selected chemicals. An addendum on microbiological aspects reviewing selected microorganisms was published in 2002. The third edition of the GDWQ was published in 2004, the first addendum to the third edition was published in 2006 and the second addendum to the third edition was published in 2008. The fourth edition will be published in 2011.

The GDWQ are subject to a rolling revision process. Through this process, microbial, chemical and radiological aspects of drinking-water are subject to periodic review, and documentation related to aspects of protection and control of public drinking-water quality is accordingly prepared and updated.

Since the first edition of the GDWQ, WHO has published information on health criteria and other supporting information to the GDWQ, describing the approaches used in deriving guideline values and presenting critical reviews and evaluations of the effects on human health of the substances or contaminants of potential health concern in drinking-water. In the first and second editions, these constituted Volume 2 of the GDWQ. Since publication of the third edition, they comprise a series of free-standing monographs, including this one.

For each chemical contaminant or substance considered, a lead institution prepared a background document evaluating the risks for human health from exposure to the particular chemical in drinking-water. Institutions from Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (USA) prepared the documents for the fourth edition.

Under the oversight of a group of coordinators, each of whom was responsible for a group of chemicals considered in the GDWQ, the draft health criteria documents were submitted to a number of scientific institutions and selected experts for peer review. Comments were taken into consideration by the coordinators and authors. The draft documents were also released to the public domain for comment and submitted for final evaluation by expert meetings.

During the preparation of background documents and at expert meetings, careful consideration was given to information available in previous risk assessments carried out by the International Programme on Chemical Safety, in its Environmental Health Criteria monographs and Concise International Chemical Assessment Documents, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the Joint FAO/WHO Meeting on Pesticide Residues and the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (which evaluates contaminants such as lead, cadmium, nitrate and nitrite, in addition to food additives).

Further up-to-date information on the GDWQ and the process of their development is available on the WHO Internet site and in the current edition of the GDWQ.

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The work of the following working group coordinators was crucial in the development of this document and others contributing to the fourth edition:

Dr J. Cotruvo, J. Cotruvo & Associates, USA (*Materials and chemicals*)
Mr J.K. Fawell, United Kingdom (*Naturally occurring and industrial contaminants and Pesticides*)
Ms M. Giddings, Health Canada (*Disinfectants and disinfection by-products*)
Mr P. Jackson, WRc-NSF, United Kingdom (*Chemicals – practical aspects*)
Professor Y. Magara, Hokkaido University, Japan (*Analytical achievability*)
Dr A.V. Festo Ngowi, Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences, United Republic of Tanzania (*Pesticides*)
Dr E. Ohanian, Environmental Protection Agency, USA (*Disinfectants and disinfection by-products*)

The draft text was discussed at the Expert Consultation for the fourth edition of the GDWQ, held in December 2011. The final version of the document takes into consideration comments from both peer reviewers and the public. The input of those who provided comments and of participants at the meeting is gratefully acknowledged.

The WHO coordinators were Mr R. Bos and Mr B. Gordon, WHO Headquarters. Ms C. Vickers provided a liaison with the International Programme on Chemical Safety, WHO Headquarters. Mr M. Zaim, Public Health and the Environment Programme, WHO Headquarters, provided input on pesticides added to drinking-water for public health purposes.

Ms P. Ward provided invaluable administrative support throughout the review and publication process. Ms M. Sheffer of Ottawa, Canada, was responsible for the scientific editing of the document.

Many individuals from various countries contributed to the development of the GDWQ. The efforts of all who contributed to the preparation of this document and in particular those who provided peer or public domain review comments are greatly appreciated.

Acronyms and abbreviations used in the text

DNA	deoxyribonucleic acid
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GDWQ	<i>Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality</i>
Hb	haemoglobin
JECFA	Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives
LD ₅₀	median lethal dose
LOAEL	lowest-observed-adverse-effect level
metHb	methaemoglobin
NADH	reduced nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide
NOEL	no-observed-effect level
USA	United States of America
USEPA	United States Environmental Protection Agency
WHO	World Health Organization

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1. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

1.1 Identity

Nitrate and nitrite are naturally occurring ions that are part of the nitrogen cycle. The nitrate ion (NO_3^-) is the stable form of combined nitrogen for oxygenated systems. Although chemically unreactive, it can be reduced by microbial action. The nitrite ion (NO_2^-) contains nitrogen in a relatively unstable oxidation state. Chemical and biological processes can further reduce nitrite to various compounds or oxidize it to nitrate (ICAIR Life Systems, Inc., 1987).

1.2 Physicochemical properties (ICAIR Life Systems, Inc., 1987)¹

Property	Nitrate	Nitrite
Acid	Conjugate base of strong acid HNO_3 ; $\text{p}K_a = -1.3$	Conjugate base of weak acid HNO_2 ; $\text{p}K_a = 3.4$
Salts	Very soluble in water	Very soluble in water
Reactivity	Unreactive	Reactive; oxidizes antioxidants, Fe^{2+} of haemoglobin to Fe^{3+} , and primary amines; nitrosates several amines and amides

1.3 Major uses and sources in drinking-water

Nitrate is used mainly in inorganic fertilizers. It is also used as an oxidizing agent and in the production of explosives, and purified potassium nitrate is used for glass making. Sodium nitrite is used as a food preservative, especially in cured meats. Nitrate is sometimes also added to food to serve as a reservoir for nitrite. Nitrates occur naturally in plants, for which it is a key nutrient. Nitrate and nitrite are also formed endogenously in mammals, including humans. Nitrate is secreted in saliva and then converted to nitrite by oral microflora.

Nitrate can reach both surface water and groundwater as a consequence of agricultural activity (including excess application of inorganic nitrogenous fertilizers and manures), from wastewater treatment and from oxidation of nitrogenous waste products in human and animal excreta, including septic tanks. Nitrite can also be formed chemically in distribution pipes by *Nitrosomonas* bacteria during stagnation of nitrate-containing and oxygen-poor drinking-water in galvanized steel pipes or if chloramination is used to provide a residual disinfectant and the process is not sufficiently well controlled.

1.4 Environmental fate

In soil, fertilizers containing inorganic nitrogen and wastes containing organic nitrogen are first decomposed to give ammonia, which is then oxidized to nitrite and nitrate. The nitrate is taken up by plants during their growth and used in the synthesis of organic nitrogenous compounds. Surplus nitrate readily moves with the groundwater (USEPA, 1987; van Duijvenboden & Matthijsen, 1989).

¹ Conversion to nitrogen: 1 mg/l as nitrate = 0.226 mg/l as nitrate-nitrogen; 1 mg/l as nitrite = 0.304 mg/l as nitrite-nitrogen.

Under aerobic conditions, nitrate can percolate in relatively large quantities into the aquifer when there is no growing plant material to take up the nitrate and when the net movement of soil water is downward to the aquifer. Degradation or denitrification occurs only to a small extent in the soil and in the rocks forming the aquifer. Under anaerobic conditions, nitrate may be denitrified or degraded almost completely to nitrogen. The presence of high or low water tables, the amount of rainwater, the presence of other organic material and other physicochemical properties are also important in determining the fate of nitrate in soil (van Duijvenboden & Loch, 1983; Mesinga, Speijers & Meulenbelt, 2003; Fewtrell, 2004; Dubrovsky & Hamilton, 2010). In surface water, nitrification and denitrification may also occur, depending on the temperature and the pH. The uptake of nitrate by plants, however, is responsible for most of the nitrate reduction in surface water.

Nitrogen compounds are formed in the air by lightning or discharged into it from industrial processes, motor vehicles and intensive agriculture. Nitrate is present in air primarily as nitric acid and inorganic aerosols, as well as nitrate radicals and organic gases or aerosols. These are removed by wet and dry deposition.

2. ENVIRONMENTAL LEVELS AND HUMAN EXPOSURE

2.1 Air

Atmospheric nitrate concentrations ranging from 0.1 to 0.4 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ have been reported, the lowest concentrations being found in the South Pacific (Prospero & Savoie, 1989). Higher concentrations ranging from 1 to 40 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ have also been reported, with annual means of 1–8 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. Mean monthly nitrate concentrations in air in the Netherlands range from 1 to 14 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ (Janssen, Visser & Roemer, 1989). Indoor nitrate aerosol concentrations of 1.1–5.6 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ were found to be related to outdoor concentrations (Yocom, 1982).

2.2 Water

Concentrations of nitrate in rainwater of up to 5 mg/l have been observed in industrial areas (van Duijvenboden & Matthijsen, 1989). In rural areas, concentrations are somewhat lower.

The nitrate concentration in surface water is normally low (0–18 mg/l) but can reach high levels as a result of agricultural runoff, refuse dump runoff or contamination with human or animal wastes. The concentration often fluctuates with the season and may increase when the river is fed by nitrate-rich aquifers. Nitrate concentrations have gradually increased in many European countries in the last few decades and have sometimes doubled over the past 20 years. In the United Kingdom, for example, an average annual increase of 0.7 mg/l has been observed in some rivers (Young & Morgan-Jones, 1980).

NITRATE AND NITRITE IN DRINKING-WATER

The natural nitrate concentration in groundwater under aerobic conditions is a few milligrams per litre and depends strongly on soil type and on the geological situation. In the United States of America (USA), naturally occurring levels do not exceed 4–9 mg/l for nitrate and 0.3 mg/l for nitrite (USEPA, 1987). As a result of agricultural activities, the nitrate concentration can easily reach several hundred milligrams per litre (WHO, 1985b). For example, concentrations of up to 1500 mg/l were found in groundwater in an agricultural area of India (Jacks & Sharma, 1983).

In the USA, nitrates are present in most surface water and groundwater supplies at levels below 4 mg/l, with levels exceeding 20 mg/l in about 3% of surface waters and 6% of groundwaters. In 1986, a nitrate concentration of 44 mg/l (10 mg of nitrate-nitrogen per litre) was exceeded in 40 surface water and 568 groundwater supplies. Nitrite levels were not surveyed but are expected to be much lower than 3.3 mg/l (USEPA, 1987).

The increasing use of artificial fertilizers, the disposal of wastes (particularly from animal farming) and changes in land use are the main factors responsible for the progressive increase in nitrate levels in groundwater supplies over the last 20 years. In Denmark and the Netherlands, for example, nitrate concentrations are increasing by 0.2–1.3 mg/l per year in some areas (WHO, 1985b). Because of the delay in the response of groundwater to changes in soil, some endangered aquifers have not yet shown the increase expected from the increased use of nitrogen fertilizer or manure. Once the nitrate reaches these aquifers, the aquifers will remain contaminated for decades, even if there is a substantial reduction in the nitrate loading of the surface.

In most countries, nitrate levels in drinking-water derived from surface water do not exceed 10 mg/l. In some areas, however, concentrations are higher as a result of runoff and the discharge of sewage effluent and certain industrial wastes. In 15 European countries, the percentage of the population exposed to nitrate levels in drinking-water above 50 mg/l ranged from 0.5% to 10% (WHO, 1985b; ECETOC, 1988); this corresponds to nearly 10 million people. Individual wells in agricultural areas throughout the world especially contribute to nitrate-related toxicity problems, and nitrate levels in the well water often exceed 50 mg/l.

Nitrite levels in drinking-water are usually below 0.1 mg/l. In 1993, a maximum value of 0.21 mg/l was detected in the Netherlands (RIVM, 1993).

Chloramination may give rise to the formation of nitrite within the distribution system, and the concentration of nitrite may increase as the water moves towards the extremities of the system. Nitrification in distribution systems can increase nitrite levels, usually by 0.2–1.5 mg of nitrite per litre, but potentially by more than 3 mg of nitrite per litre (AWWARF, 1995).

2.3 Food

Vegetables and cured meat are in general the main sources of nitrate and nitrite in the diet, but small amounts may be present in fish and dairy products. Meat products may contain <2.7–945 mg of nitrate per kilogram and <0.2–6.4 mg of nitrite per kilogram; dairy products may contain <3–27 mg of nitrate per kilogram and <0.2–1.7 mg of nitrite per kilogram (ECETOC, 1988). Several vegetables and fruits contain 200–2500 mg of nitrate per kilogram (van Duijvenboden & Matthijsen, 1989). The nitrate content of vegetables can be affected by processing of the food, the use of fertilizers and growing conditions, especially the soil temperature and (day)light intensity (Gangolli et al., 1994; FAO/WHO, 1995). Vegetables such as beetroot, lettuce, radish and spinach often contain nitrate concentrations above 2500 mg/kg, especially when they are cultivated in greenhouses. Nitrite levels in food are very low (generally well below 10 mg/kg) and rarely exceed 100 mg/kg. Exceptions to this are vegetables that have been damaged, poorly stored or stored for extended periods, as well as pickled or fermented vegetables. In such circumstances, nitrite levels of up to 400 mg/kg have been found (FAO/WHO, 1995).

2.4 Estimated total exposure and relative contribution of drinking-water

Air pollution appears to be a minor source of nitrate exposure. In general, vegetables will be the main source of nitrate intake when nitrate levels in drinking-water are below 10 mg/l (Chilvers, Inskip & Caygill, 1984; USEPA, 1987; ECETOC, 1988).

When nitrate levels in drinking-water exceed 50 mg/l, drinking-water will be the major source of total nitrate intake, especially for bottle-fed infants. In the Netherlands, the average population exposure is approximately 140 mg of nitrate per day (including the nitrate in drinking-water). The contribution of drinking-water to nitrate intake is usually less than 14%. For bottle-fed infants, daily intake from formula made with water containing 50 mg of nitrate per litre would average about 8.3–8.5 mg of nitrate per kilogram of body weight per day.

The mean dietary intakes determined by the duplicate portion technique (WHO, 1985a) range from 43 to 131 mg of nitrate per day and from 1.2 to 3 mg of nitrite per day. Estimates of the total nitrate intake based on the proportion of nitrate excreted in the urine (Bartholomew et al., 1979) range from 39 to 268 mg/day, the higher values applying to vegetarian and nitrate-rich diets (ECETOC, 1988). The estimated total daily intake of nitrate ranged in the United Kingdom from 50 to 81 mg per person (Bonnell, 1995; Schuddeboom, 1995), in Denmark from 70 to 172 mg per person (Bonnell, 1995) and in Germany from 70 to 110 mg per person (Bonnell, 1995). According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), the average nitrate intake from food is approximately 40–100 mg/day for males. The daily nitrite intake ranges from 0.3 to 2.6 mg/day, primarily from cured meat (NAS, 1981). Nitrite present in cured meat has been reported to account for up to 70% of total dietary intake of this substance, depending on the intake of such meat and the origin and type of cured meat consumed. Mean dietary nitrite intake from all food

sources has been reported to range from <0.1 to 8.7 mg of nitrite per person per day for European diets (FAO/WHO, 1995). EFSA (2008) indicated that average adult consumption of nitrate from all dietary sources, including water for the United Kingdom and France, was 91 and 141 mg per person, respectively, indicating that average intakes have remained relatively stable. For some individuals and communities where vegetables with particularly high nitrate levels are consumed or where well water contains elevated concentrations of nitrate, consumption may be significantly higher.

3. KINETICS AND METABOLISM IN LABORATORY ANIMALS AND HUMANS

3.1 Absorption, distribution and elimination

Ingested nitrate is readily and completely absorbed from the upper small intestine. Nitrite may be absorbed directly from both the stomach and the upper small intestine. Part of the ingested nitrite reacts with gastric contents prior to absorption. At least 25% of the ingested nitrate is transported into the saliva, where the concentration is approximately 10 times greater than that in plasma as a result of bioconcentration. About 20% of the nitrate in saliva is converted to nitrite by commensal bacteria on the surface of the tongue. Individuals with gastroenteritis have a higher conversion rate (EFSA, 2008). There is evidence that the use of antibacterial mouthwashes may reduce this conversion (van Maanen et al., 1996; Govoni et al., 2008).

Nitrate is rapidly distributed throughout the tissues. Approximately 25% of ingested nitrate is actively secreted into saliva, where it is partly (20%) reduced to nitrite by the oral microflora; nitrate and nitrite are then swallowed and re-enter the stomach. Bacterial reduction of nitrate may also take place in other parts of the human gastrointestinal tract, but not normally in the stomach; exceptions are reported in humans with low gastric acidity, such as artificially fed infants, certain patients in whom hydrochloric acid secretion is slower than normal or patients using antacids (Colbers et al., 1995). In rats, active secretion and reduction of nitrate in saliva are virtually absent (Walker, 1995). Total nitrate reduction is probably less in rats than in humans.

Absorbed nitrite is rapidly oxidized to nitrate in the blood. Nitrite in the bloodstream is involved in the oxidation of haemoglobin (Hb) to methaemoglobin (metHb): the Fe^{2+} present in the haem group is oxidized to its Fe^{3+} form, and the remaining nitrite binds firmly to this oxidized haem. The Fe^{3+} form does not allow oxygen transport, owing to the strong binding of oxygen (Jaffé, 1981; United States National Research Council, 1995). Therefore, methaemoglobinaemia can lead to cyanosis.

Nitrite has been shown to cross the placenta and cause the formation of fetal methaemoglobinaemia in rats. It may react in the stomach with nitrosatable compounds (e.g. secondary and tertiary amines or amides in food) to form *N*-nitroso compounds. Such endogenous nitrosation has been shown to occur in human as well

as animal gastric juice both in vivo and in vitro, mostly at higher pH values, when both nitrite and nitrosatable compounds were present simultaneously (Shephard, 1995; FAO/WHO, 1996).

The major part of the ingested nitrate is eventually excreted in urine as nitrate, ammonia or urea, faecal excretion being negligible. Little nitrite is excreted (WHO, 1985b; ICAIR Life Systems, Inc., 1987; Speijers et al., 1989).

3.2 Endogenous synthesis of nitrate and nitrite

The excess nitrate excretion that has often been observed after low nitrate and nitrite intake originates from endogenous synthesis, which amounts, in normal healthy humans, to 1 mmol/day on average, corresponding to 62 mg of nitrate per day or 14 mg of nitrate-nitrogen per day. Gastrointestinal infections greatly increase nitrate excretion, as a result, at least in part, of increased endogenous (non-bacterial) nitrate synthesis, probably induced by activation of the mammalian reticuloendothelial system (WHO, 1985b; Speijers et al., 1989; Wishnok et al., 1995; FAO/WHO, 1996). This endogenous synthesis of nitrate complicates the risk assessment of nitrate.

Increased endogenous synthesis of nitrate, as reported in animals with induced infections and inflammatory reactions, was also observed in humans. Infections and non-specific diarrhoea played a role in the increased endogenous synthesis of nitrate (Tannenbaum et al., 1978; Green et al., 1981; Hegesh & Shiloah, 1982; Bartholomew & Hill, 1984; Lee et al., 1986; Gangolli et al., 1994). These observations are all consistent with the induction of one or more nitric oxide synthases by inflammatory agents, analogous to the experiments described in animals and macrophages. This induction in humans has been difficult to demonstrate directly, but administration of [¹⁵N]arginine to two volunteers resulted in the incorporation of ¹⁵N into urinary nitrate in both individuals, confirming the arginine–nitric oxide pathway in humans (Leaf, Wishnok & Tannenbaum, 1989).

Nitrate excretion in excess of nitrate intake by humans was reported in 1916, but this result remained obscure until the end of the 1970s, when it was re-examined because of the potential involvement of nitrate in endogenous nitrosation. A relatively constant daily production of about 1 mmol of nitrate was confirmed. A major pathway for endogenous nitrate production is conversion of arginine by macrophages to nitric oxide and citrulline, followed by oxidation of the nitric oxide to nitrous anhydride and then reaction of nitrous anhydride with water to yield nitrite. Nitrite is rapidly oxidized to nitrate through reaction with Hb. In addition to macrophages, many cell types can form nitric oxide, generally from arginine. Under some conditions, bacteria can form nitric oxide by reduction of nitrite. These processes can lead to nitrosation of amines at neutral pH, presumably by reaction with nitrous anhydride. The question of whether the arginine–nitrate pathway can be associated with increased cancer risk via exposure to *N*-nitroso compounds remains open. Nitric oxide is mutagenic towards bacteria and human cells in culture; it causes deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) strand breaks, deamination (probably via nitrous anhydride) and oxidative damage; and it

can activate cellular defence mechanisms. In virtually all of these cases, the biological response is paralleled by the final nitrate levels. Thus, whereas endogenously formed nitrate may itself be of relatively minor toxicological significance, the levels of this substance may serve as indicators for those potentially important nitric oxide-related processes that gave rise to it (Wishnok et al., 1995).

As mentioned above, both *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies showed that nitrate can be reduced to nitrite by bacterial and mammalian metabolic pathways, via the widespread nitrate reductase (Gangolli et al., 1994). In humans, saliva is the major site for the formation of nitrite. About 5% of dietary nitrate is converted to nitrite (Spiegelhalter, Eisenbrand & Preussmann, 1976; Eisenbrand et al., 1980; Walters & Smith, 1981; Gangolli et al., 1994). A direct correlation between gastric pH, bacterial colonization and gastric nitrite concentration has been observed in healthy people with a range of pH values from 1 to 7 (Mueller et al., 1983, 1986). In individuals with gastrointestinal disorders and achlorhydria, high levels of nitrite can be reached (6 mg/l) (Rudell et al., 1976, 1978; Dolby et al., 1984). The situation in neonates is not clear. It is commonly accepted that infants younger than 3 months may be highly susceptible to gastric bacterial nitrate reduction, as the pH is generally higher than in adults (Speijers et al., 1989). However, the presence of acid-producing lactobacilli in the stomach may be important, as these organisms do not reduce nitrate and may maintain a pH low enough to inhibit colonization by nitrate-reducing bacteria (Bartholomew et al., 1980). As mentioned above, nitrite may also be produced via the arginine-nitric oxide pathway but would be undetectable because of the rapid oxidation to nitrate. One possible example of nitrite production by this route, however, is the methaemoglobinaemia observed in infants suffering from diarrhoea (Gangolli et al., 1994).

In addition to the endogenous production of nitrate and its role in the nitric oxide pathway, there is increasing evidence for the beneficial role of this pathway in human health. There is evidence for its importance in protecting against oral and gastrointestinal diseases (Duncan et al., 1997) and also for its role in vascular fitness and exerting antihypertensive effects (Bryan & Loscalzo, 2011; Carlstrom et al., 2011; Lansley et al., 2011; Montenegro et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2011).

4. EFFECTS ON EXPERIMENTAL ANIMALS AND IN VITRO SYSTEMS

4.1 Acute exposure

The acute oral toxicity of nitrate to laboratory animals is low to moderate. Median lethal doses (LD₅₀ values) of 1600–9000 mg of sodium nitrate per kilogram of body weight have been reported in mice, rats and rabbits. Ruminants are more sensitive to the effects of nitrate as a result of high nitrate reduction in the rumen; the LD₅₀ for cows was 450 mg of sodium nitrate per kilogram of body weight. Nitrite is more toxic than nitrate: LD₅₀ values of 85–220 mg of sodium nitrite per kilogram of body weight have been reported for mice and rats (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996).

4.2 Short-term exposure

In a 13-week study in which nitrite was given to rats in drinking-water, a dose-related hypertrophy of the adrenal zona glomerulosa was observed at all dose levels (100, 300, 1000 or 3000 mg of potassium nitrite per litre). Increased metHb levels were seen only in the highest dose group (Til et al., 1988). FAO/WHO (1995) concluded that the no-observed-effect level (NOEL) in this study was 100 mg of potassium nitrite per litre (equivalent to 5.4 mg/kg of body weight per day expressed as nitrite ion), because the hypertrophy seen at this dose was not significantly different from the controls.

An additional 13-week study in which nitrite was also given in drinking-water, including lower doses of potassium nitrite and two doses of sodium nitrite (equimolar to the low and high doses of potassium nitrite), confirmed the finding of the adrenal hypertrophy of the zona glomerulosa for potassium nitrite and also revealed hypertrophy in the animals given sodium nitrite. The NOEL for the adrenal hypertrophy of the zona glomerulosa was 50 mg of potassium nitrite per litre (equivalent to 5 mg of potassium nitrite per kilogram of body weight per day) (Kuper & Til, 1995). Since then, studies designed to clarify the etiology of this hypertrophy and to establish its significance for human health have been partly performed and are currently in progress. The studies already performed confirmed the adrenal hypertrophy in another rat strain. However, the effects were seen only at higher dose levels. It was also seen that the hypertrophy was still present after a 30-day recovery period but had disappeared after a 60-day recovery period. At present, the mechanism of hypertrophy induced by nitrite is not clear (Boink, Dormans & Speijers, 1995).

A variety of experimental and field studies in different mammals identified inorganic nitrate as a goitrogenic agent. It could be shown in rats by oral and parenteral application of potassium nitrate (Wyngaarden, Stanbury & Rabb, 1953; Bloomfield et al., 1961; Alexander & Wolff, 1966; Wolff, 1994), of nitrate in hay (Lee, Weiss & Horvath, 1970) and of sodium nitrate (Höring et al., 1985; Seffner & Höring, 1987a,b). Antithyroid effects of nitrate were also found in sheep (Bloomfield et al., 1961) and in pigs by application of potassium nitrate (Jahreis et al., 1986, 1987). Furthermore, nitrate was goitrogenic to livestock: pigs (Körber, Groppe & Leirer, 1983), cattle (Körber, Groppe & Leirer, 1983; Körber, Rossow & Otta, 1985), sheep (Körber, Groppe & Leirer, 1983) and goats (Prasad, 1983).

4.3 Long-term exposure

The only observed effect of nitrate in rats after 2 years of oral administration was growth inhibition; this was seen at dietary concentrations of 5% sodium nitrate and higher. The NOEL in this study was 1%, which corresponds to 370 mg of nitrate per kilogram of body weight per day (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996). A more recent long-term study was solely a carcinogenicity study, in which the highest dose levels of 1820 mg of nitrate per kilogram of body weight per day did not show

carcinogenic effects. However, this level could not be considered as a NOEL, because complete histopathological examinations were not performed (FAO/WHO, 1996).

One of the long-term effects of nitrite reported in a variety of animal species is vitamin A deficiency; this is probably caused by the direct reaction of nitrite with the vitamin. The most important effects reported in long-term animal studies were an increase in metHb level and histopathological changes in the lungs and heart in rats receiving nitrite in drinking-water for 2 years. The lowest-observed-adverse-effect level (LOAEL), which gave a metHb level of 5%, was 1000 mg of sodium nitrite per litre; the NOEL was 100 mg of sodium nitrite per litre, equivalent to 10 mg of sodium nitrite per kilogram of body weight per day (or 6.7 mg/kg of body weight per day expressed as nitrite ion) (Speijers et al., 1989).

4.4 Reproductive and developmental toxicity

The reproductive behaviour of guinea-pigs was impaired only at very high nitrate concentrations (30 000 mg of potassium nitrate per litre); the NOEL was 10 000 mg/l (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996). In rabbits, dose levels of 250 or 500 mg of nitrate per litre administered during 22 weeks revealed no detrimental effects on reproductive performance after successive gestations. In sheep and cattle, no abortions were observed at dose levels causing severe methaemoglobinaemia (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996).

Nitrite appeared to cause fetotoxicity in rats at drinking-water concentrations equivalent to 200 and 300 mg of sodium nitrite per kilogram of body weight per day, causing increased maternal metHb levels. However, after similar doses in feed in other studies, no embryotoxic effects were observed in rats. In a reproductive toxicity study in guinea-pigs at dose levels of 0, 50 or 60 mg of sodium nitrite per kilogram of body weight per day given by subcutaneous injection, fetal death followed by abortion occurred at the highest dose level. Teratogenic effects were not observed in reported studies in mice and rats (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996).

4.5 Mutagenicity and related end-points

Nitrate is not mutagenic in bacteria and mammalian cells in vitro. Chromosomal aberrations were observed in the bone marrow of rats after oral nitrite uptake, but this could have been due to exogenous *N*-nitroso compound formation. Nitrite is mutagenic. It causes morphological transformations in in vitro systems; mutagenic activity was also found in a combined in vivo–in vitro experiment with Syrian hamsters. The results of in vivo experiments were controversial (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996).

4.6 Carcinogenicity

Nitrate is not carcinogenic in laboratory animals. Some studies in which nitrite was given to mice or rats in the diet showed slightly increased tumour incidence; however,

the possibility of exogenous *N*-nitroso compound formation in these studies could not be excluded. In studies in which high levels of nitrite and simultaneously high levels of nitrosatable precursors were administered, increased tumour incidence was seen (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996, 2003a). These types of tumours could be characteristic of the presumed corresponding *N*-nitroso compound endogenously formed. However, this increase in tumour incidence was seen only at extremely high nitrite levels, in the order of 1000 mg/l of drinking-water. At lower nitrite levels, tumour incidence resembled those of control groups treated with the nitrosatable compound only. On the basis of adequately performed and reported studies, it may be concluded that nitrite itself is not carcinogenic to animals (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996, 2003a).

5. EFFECTS ON HUMANS

5.1 Methaemoglobinaemia

The toxicity of nitrate to humans is mainly attributable to its reduction to nitrite. The major biological effect of nitrite in humans is its involvement in the oxidation of normal Hb to metHb, which is unable to transport oxygen to the tissues. The reduced oxygen transport becomes clinically manifest when metHb concentrations reach 10% of normal Hb concentrations and above; the condition, called methaemoglobinaemia, causes cyanosis and, at higher concentrations, asphyxia. The normal metHb level in humans is less than 2%; in infants under 3 months of age, it is less than 3%.

The Hb of young infants is more susceptible to metHb formation than that of older children and adults. This higher susceptibility was believed to be the result of the large proportion of fetal Hb still present in the blood of these infants, which was more easily oxidized to metHb, but this has been shown to not be the case (Avery, 1999). However, reduced nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide (NADH)–cytochrome b₅–metHb reductase does not reach reference levels until after 4 months of age, with a consequent reduction in the ability to reduce metHb back to Hb. The net result is that a dose of nitrite causes a higher metHb formation in these infants than in adults. With respect to exposure to nitrate, these young infants are also more at risk because of a relatively high intake of nitrate in relation to body weight and, under certain conditions, a higher reduction of nitrate to nitrite by gastric bacteria as a result of the low production of gastric acid (FAO/WHO, 1996). The higher reduction of nitrate to nitrite in the young infants is not quantified very well, and it appears that gastrointestinal infections are important in significantly increasing the risk of higher yield of nitrite and thus higher metHb formation (ECETOC, 1988; Speijers et al., 1989; Möller, 1995; Schuddeboom, 1995; FAO/WHO, 1996). However, there is also evidence that gastrointestinal infections may cause metHb formation through the nitric oxide pathway (Avery, 1999). Other studies have shown that high nitrate concentration, above 100 mg/l, is an important cause of metHb formation and that breastfeeding is protective in exposed populations. However, gastrointestinal infection is a very important contributor. Thus, not only is the microbiological quality of

drinking-water important, but also proper hygiene is essential to prevent such infections (Pollack & Pollack, 1994; Hanukoglu & Danon, 1996; Zeman et al., 2002).

Other groups potentially susceptible to metHb formation include pregnant women and people deficient in glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase or metHb reductase (Speijers et al., 1989).

5.2 Adults and children above the age of 3 months

Cases of methaemoglobinaemia have been reported in adults consuming high doses of nitrate by accident or as a medical treatment. Fatalities were reported after single intakes of 4–50 g of nitrate (equivalent to 67–833 mg of nitrate per kilogram of body weight) (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996), many of which occurred among special risk groups in whose members gastric acidity was reduced. Toxic doses—with metHb formation as a criterion for toxicity—ranged from 2 to 9 g (equivalent to 33–150 mg of nitrate per kilogram of body weight) (FAO/WHO, 1996). In a controlled study, an oral dose of 7–10.5 g of ammonium nitrate and an intravenous dose of 9.5 g of sodium nitrate did not cause increased metHb levels in adults, although vomiting and diarrhoea occurred (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996).

Accidental human intoxications have been reported as a result of the presence of nitrite in food. The oral lethal dose for humans was estimated to range from 33 to 250 mg of nitrite per kilogram of body weight, the lower doses applying to children and elderly people. Toxic doses giving rise to methaemoglobinaemia ranged from 0.4 to 200 mg/kg of body weight (FAO/WHO, 1996).

Another source of information with respect to nitrite toxicity in humans is the use of sodium nitrite as medication for vasodilatation or as an antidote in cyanide poisoning. Doses of 30–300 mg per person (equivalent to 0.5–5 mg/kg of body weight) were reported not to cause toxic effects (FAO/WHO, 1996).

Few cases of methaemoglobinaemia have been reported in older children. A correlation study among children aged 1–8 years in the USA showed that there was no difference in metHb levels between 64 children consuming high-nitrate well water (22–111 mg of nitrate-nitrogen per litre) and 38 children consuming low-nitrate water (<10 mg of nitrate-nitrogen per litre). These concentrations correspond to 100–500 and <44 mg of nitrate per litre, respectively. All the metHb levels were within the normal range, suggesting that older children are relatively insensitive to the effects of nitrate (Craun, Greathouse & Gunderson, 1981).

5.3 Infants under 3 months of age

Cases of methaemoglobinaemia related to lower intakes of nitrate appear to be restricted to infants. In infants under the age of 3 months, the conversion of nitrate to nitrite and metHb formation are high, as discussed above. Gastrointestinal disturbances play a crucial role, also as discussed above. Toxic effects can therefore

be induced at a much lower dose of nitrate than in adults. According to Corré & Breimer (1979), assuming an 80% reduction of nitrate to nitrite in these young infants, the toxic dose ranged from 1.5 to 2.7 mg of nitrate per kilogram of body weight, using 10% formation of metHb as a toxicity criterion. However, in reported cases of methaemoglobinaemia, the amounts of nitrate ingested were higher: 37.1–108.6 mg/kg of body weight, with an average of 56.7 mg of nitrate per kilogram of body weight (FAO/WHO, 1996). In studies in which a possible association between clinical cases of infantile methaemoglobinaemia or subclinically increased metHb levels and nitrate concentrations in drinking-water was investigated, a significant relationship was usually found, most clinical cases (97.7%) occurring at nitrate levels of 44.3–88.6 mg/l or higher (Walton, 1951; FAO/WHO, 1996), and almost exclusively in infants under 3 months of age (Walton, 1951). However, subsequent studies have identified methaemoglobinaemia only at nitrate concentrations in water that are higher than this, mostly in excess of 100 mg/l, and often in the presence of gastrointestinal infections. Some cases of infant methaemoglobinaemia have been described in which increased endogenous nitrate (nitrite) synthesis as a result of gastrointestinal infection appeared to be the only causative factor (FAO/WHO, 1996). As most cases of infantile methaemoglobinaemia reported in the literature have been associated with the consumption of private and often bacterially contaminated well water, the involvement of infections is highly probable. Most of these studies may be therefore less suitable from the point of view of the quantitative assessment of the risk of nitrate intake for healthy infants.

5.4 Carcinogenicity

Nitrite was shown to react with nitrosatable compounds in the human stomach to form *N*-nitroso compounds. Many of these *N*-nitroso compounds have been found to be carcinogenic in all the animal species tested, although some of the most readily formed compounds, such as *N*-nitrosoproline, are not carcinogenic in humans. The *N*-nitroso compounds carcinogenic in animal species are probably also carcinogenic in humans. However, the data from a number of epidemiological studies are at most only suggestive. The endogenous formation of *N*-nitroso compounds is also observed in several animal species, if relatively high doses of both nitrite and nitrosatable compounds are administered simultaneously. Thus, a link between cancer risk and endogenous nitrosation as a result of high intake of nitrate and/or nitrite and nitrosatable compounds is possible (Speijers et al., 1989; FAO/WHO, 1996, 2003a,b).

Several reviews of epidemiological studies have been published; most of these studies are geographical correlation studies relating estimated nitrate intake to gastric cancer risk. The United States National Research Council found some suggestion of an association between high nitrate intake and gastric and/or oesophageal cancer (NAS, 1981). However, individual exposure data were lacking, and several other plausible causes of gastric cancer were present. In a later review by the World Health Organization (WHO, 1985b), some of the earlier associations appeared to be weakened following the introduction of individual exposure data or after adjustment for socioeconomic factors. No convincing evidence was found of an association

between gastric cancer and the consumption of drinking-water in which nitrate concentrations of up to 45 mg/l were present. No firm evidence was found at higher levels either, but an association could not be excluded because of the inadequacy of the data available. More recent geographical correlation and occupational exposure studies also failed to demonstrate a clear relationship between nitrate intake and gastric cancer risk, although these studies were well designed. A case-control study in Canada, in which dietary exposure to nitrate and nitrite was estimated in detail, showed that exogenous nitrite intake, largely from preserved meat, was significantly associated with the risk of developing gastric cancer (ECETOC, 1988). On the other hand, case-control studies based on food frequency questionnaires tend to show a protective effect of the estimated nitrate intake on gastric cancer risk. Most likely this is due to the known strong protective effect of vegetables and fruits on the risk of gastric cancer (Möller, 1995; FAO/WHO, 1996). Studies that have assessed the effect of nitrate from sources other than vegetables, such as the concentration in drinking-water or occupational exposure to nitrate dusts, have not shown a protective effect against gastric cancer risk. For other types of cancer, there are no adequate data with which to establish any association with nitrite or nitrate intake (Gangolli et al., 1994; Möller, 1995; FAO/WHO, 1996).

It has been established that the intake of certain dietary components present in vegetables, such as vitamins C and E, decreases the risk of gastric cancer. This is generally assumed to be at least partly due to the resulting decrease in the conversion of nitrate to nitrite and in the formation of *N*-nitroso compounds. It is possible that any effect of a high nitrate intake per se is masked in correlation studies by the antagonizing effects of simultaneously consumed dietary protective components. However, the absence of any link with cancer in occupational exposure studies is not in agreement with this theory.

5.5 Other effects

Congenital malformations have been related to high nitrate levels in drinking-water in Australia; however, these observations were not confirmed. Other studies also failed to demonstrate a relationship between congenital malformations and nitrate intake (WHO, 1985b; ECETOC, 1988; Manassaram et al., 2007).

Studies relating cardiovascular effects to nitrate levels in drinking-water gave inconsistent results (WHO, 1985b).

Possible relationships between nitrate intake and effects on the thyroid have also been studied. It is known that nitrate can competitively inhibit iodine uptake, as with similar anions. However, what is known to occur in the laboratory may not result in adverse effects in human populations under normal circumstances of exposure. In addition to effects of nitrate on the thyroid observed in experimental animal studies and in livestock, epidemiological studies revealed indications for an antithyroid effect of nitrate in humans. If dietary iodine is available at an adequate range (corresponding to a daily iodine excretion of 150–300 µg/day), the effect of nitrate is likely to be

weak, with a tendency to zero. The nitrate effect on thyroid function may be strong if a nutritional iodine deficiency exists simultaneously (Höring, Nagel & Haerting, 1991; Höring, 1992).

Hettche (1956a,b) described an association between high nitrate concentrations in drinking-water and goitre incidence. As well, Höring & Schiller (1987), Sauerbrey & Andree (1988), Höring, Nagel & Haerting (1991), Höring (1992) and van Maanen et al. (1994) found that inorganic nitrate in drinking-water is associated with endemic goitre. A dose–response relationship could be demonstrated by Höring, Nagel & Haerting (1991) (nitrate in drinking-water versus incidence of goitre) as well as by van Maanen et al. (1994) (nitrate in drinking-water versus thyroid volume). Both the experimental and epidemiological studies give the impression that nitrate in drinking-water has a stronger effect on thyroid function than does nitrate in food. The differences in nitrate kinetics after ingestion through drinking-water and through food could be the cause of the difference in thyroid effects. However, no adequate studies regarding this question exist at present. Furthermore, some of the above-mentioned studies demonstrate that dietary iodine deficiency is much more effective than nitrate exposure in causing goitre.

A number of subsequent studies in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Germany and the USA have reported a correlation between various measures of nitrate intake and effects on thyroid function, but all suffer from methodological and data problems that preclude definitive conclusions being drawn (Gatseva & Dimitrov, 1997; Gatseva et al., 1998; Hampel et al., 2003; Tajtakova et al., 2006; Gatseva & Argirova, 2008a,b; Radikova et al., 2008; Ward et al., 2010).

Other studies, including a clinical study in the Netherlands, did not find any relationship between nitrate intake and thyroid structure or function (Hunault et al., 2007; Blount et al., 2009).

Because there are a number of factors that may complicate the findings of epidemiological studies, including low iodine intake and thiocyanates in the diet, it is important that studies are sufficiently comprehensive and take such factors into account. Where small communities that use a range of wells with varying nitrate concentrations are studied, better characterization of intake is important, rather than relying purely on nitrate concentrations.

In addition to the effect of nitrite on the adrenal zona glomerulosa in rats, a study in humans indicated that sodium nitrite (0.5 mg of sodium nitrite per kilogram of body weight per day, for 9 days) caused a decreased production of adrenal steroids, as reflected by the decreased concentration of 17-hydroxysteroid and 17-ketosteroids in urine (Til et al., 1988; Kuper & Til, 1995). Similar results were also found in rabbits (Violante, Cianetti & Ordine, 1973).

6. PRACTICAL ASPECTS

6.1 Analytical methods and achievability

Spectrometric techniques are used for the determination of nitrate in water. Detection limits range from 0.01 to 1 mg/l (ISO, 1986, 1988). A molecular absorption spectrometric method is available for the determination of nitrite in potable water, raw water and wastewater. The limit of detection lies within the range of 0.005–0.01 mg/l (ISO, 1984). A continuous-flow spectrometric method for the determination of nitrite, nitrate or the sum of both in various types of water is suitable at concentrations ranging from 0.05 to 5 mg/l for nitrite and from 1 to 100 mg/l for nitrite/nitrate, both in the undiluted sample (ISO, 1996).

Nitrate and nitrite can also be determined in water by liquid chromatography, down to a level of 0.1 mg/l for nitrate and 0.05 mg/l for nitrite (ISO, 1992).

6.2 Treatment and control methods and technical performance

The most appropriate means of controlling nitrate concentrations, particularly in groundwater, is the prevention of contamination (Schmoll et al., 2006). This may take the form of appropriate management of agricultural practices, the careful siting of pit latrines and septic tanks, sewer leakage control, as well as management of fertilizer and manure application and storage of animal manures. It may also take the form of denitrification of wastewater effluents.

Methaemoglobinaemia has most frequently been associated with private wells. It is particularly important to ensure that septic tanks and pit latrines are not sited near a well or where a well is to be dug and to ensure that animal manure is kept at a sufficient distance to ensure that runoff cannot enter the well or the ground near the well. It is also particularly important that the household use of manures and fertilizers on small plots near wells should be managed with care to avoid potential contamination. The well should be sufficiently protected to prevent runoff from entering the well. Where there are elevated concentrations of nitrate or where inspection of the well indicated that there are sources of nitrate close by that could be causing contamination, particularly where there are indications that microbiological quality might also be poor, a number of actions can be taken. Water should be boiled or disinfected by an appropriate means before consumption. Where alternative supplies are available for bottle-fed infants, these can be used, taking care to ensure that they are microbiologically safe. Steps should then be taken to protect the well and ensure that sources of both nitrate and microbiological contamination are removed from the vicinity of the well.

In areas where household wells are common, health authorities may wish to take a number of steps to ensure that nitrate contamination is not or does not become a problem. Such steps could include targeting mothers, particularly expectant mothers, with appropriate information about water safety, assisting with visual inspection of

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wells to determine whether a problem may exist, providing testing facilities where a problem is suspected, providing guidance on disinfecting water or where nitrate levels are particularly high, providing bottled water from safe sources or providing advice as to where such water can be obtained.

With regard to piped supplies, where nitrate is present, the first potential approach to treatment of drinking-water supplies, if source substitution is not feasible, is to dilute the contaminated water with a low-nitrate source. Where blending is not feasible, a number of treatment techniques are available for drinking-water. The first is disinfection, which may serve to oxidize nitrite to the less toxic nitrate as well as minimize the pathogenic and non-pathogenic reducing bacterial population in the water. Nitrate removal methods include ion exchange (normally for groundwaters) and biological denitrification (normally for surface waters). However, there are disadvantages associated with both approaches, including the need for regeneration and disposal of spent regenerant with ion exchange and the complexities of operation and the potential for microbial and carbon feed contamination of the final water with biological denitrification.

Care should be taken with the use of chloramination for providing a residual disinfectant in the distribution system. It is important to manage this to minimize nitrite formation, either in the main distribution system or in the distribution systems of buildings where chloramines are used to control *Legionella*.

7. GUIDELINE VALUES

The guideline value for nitrate of 50 mg/l as nitrate is based on epidemiological evidence for methaemoglobinaemia in infants, which results from short-term exposure and is protective for bottle-fed infants and, consequently, other population groups. This outcome is complicated by the presence of microbial contamination and subsequent gastrointestinal infection, which can increase the risk for this group significantly. Authorities should therefore be all the more vigilant that water to be used for bottle-fed infants is microbiologically safe when nitrate is present at concentrations near the guideline value. It is recommended that water should not be used for bottle-fed infants when nitrate levels are above 100 mg/l, but that it may be used if medical authorities are vigilant for signs of methaemoglobinaemia when the nitrate concentration is between 50 and 100 mg/l, particularly where a high rate of gastrointestinal infection is present in infants and children in the population. The latter is a minor modification of previous guidance to place greater emphasis on the role of microbiological quality.

The guideline for nitrite of 3 mg/l as nitrite is based on human data showing that doses of nitrite that cause methaemoglobinaemia in infants range from 0.4 to more than 200 mg/kg of body weight. By applying the lowest level of the range (0.4 mg/kg of body weight), a body weight of 5 kg for an infant and a drinking-water consumption of 0.75 litre, a guideline value of 3 mg/l (rounded figure) can be derived.

Because of the possibility of the simultaneous occurrence of nitrate and nitrite in drinking-water, the sum of the ratios of the concentration (C) of each to its guideline value (GV) should not exceed 1, i.e.

$$\frac{C_{\text{nitrate}}}{GV_{\text{nitrate}}} + \frac{C_{\text{nitrite}}}{GV_{\text{nitrite}}} \leq 1$$

At this time, no other values are proposed for chronic effects, in view of uncertainties regarding differences in the way in which nitrate and nitrite are handled by laboratory animals and significant uncertainties in epidemiological data, particularly for effects on the thyroid.

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