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## Group Questions U.S. Capacity to Provide Countermeasures for Nuclear Disaster

By Jennifer Scholtes, CQ Staff

Among the many questions Japan's disaster has prompted the United States to ask about its own preparedness, the meltdown of nuclear reactors northeast of Tokyo has incited scrutiny about how the government would distribute lifesaving compounds during such an emergency.

Members of the National Commission on Children and Disasters, a group established by Congress in 2007 ([PL 110-161](#)), asked Obama administration officials Monday to take a close look at whether or not the United States has a sufficient stockpile and ability to distribute potassium iodide — an inorganic compound the Food and Drug Administration approved in the 1980s that can be taken in liquid or tablet form to protect individuals from cancer caused by radioactive materials emitted by uncontained nuclear power plants.

“There are ongoing concerns — many, many concerns. But I'd like to focus on one particular thing, and that's the availability of potassium iodide that would be available to children,” said Irwin Redlener, president of the Children's Health Fund and a member of the commission. “Relative to what we're watching in Japan, that needs to be at the top of the agenda.”

Redlener and other commission members said the government would likely not be able to get potassium iodide to affected individuals in time for the compound to work, even if the country has enough of it.

Those who eat, drink or breathe harmful radioactive iodine that can get into the air and food supply after a radiological or nuclear event will absorb the chemical into their thyroid, which can cause cancer. Children, because their thyroids are still developing, are at heightened risk. But if potassium iodide is taken first, it will protect the thyroid from absorption.

Nicole Lurie, assistant secretary for Preparedness and Response at the Health and Human Services Department, said the federal government carried out a preparedness exercise in recent months simulating response to a large nuclear power plant disaster. After the March 11 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the department has begun discussion of its strategy again, she said.

Most states stockpile potassium iodide, and homes in the exposure radius of the plants often have a supply, but the more pressing question is whether the compound could be delivered in time to those who do not have it on hand, she said.

“We'll be looking at this again and just being sure that the policy we've had going into this is right, and if not, changing it,” Lurie said. “We've got to go back and look at this policy and be sure that it enables children to be safe. And that's going to be an issue for states, it's going to be an issue for NRC and the nuclear power plants themselves and the communities in which these exist.”

### Commission's Time Runs Low

The commission, tasked with providing Congress with recommendations for responding to children during disasters, will terminate in April if Congress does not provide a continuation. During the last meeting of the commission before the termination date, Lurie commended the group for its influence on the government's preparedness planning.

"Largely a result of your efforts, I think the way the department prepares for and handles disasters has really been forever changed," Lurie said. "Children's issues are now hard-wired into the way we do business."

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