

Hidden Exposures

Household products may seem innocuous, but their chemicals can harm kids.

by Joanne Culley

Nine months pregnant with her second child, Carolyn Galbraith was taking a well-needed break watching a popular baby show as her son Jackson slept. But she was surprised by what she saw. "I was listening to a safety expert speaking about cribs, saying how parents needed to be careful about the distance between the slats," she recalls. "Then in the next scene, they showed that same expert cleaning the change table with a popular chemical disinfectant. I thought to myself, 'that's not a good message to be sending out to new parents.'"

Galbraith should know. She had educated herself about the potentially harmful chemicals in the home before her first child was born. She started to look closely at the labels on household cleaners and on personal care products for her and her baby. Then she systematically began removing those that contained suspect chemicals. She was alarmed by just how many products did contain these chemicals. After further research, she also eliminated pesticides and as many plastic products from her home as possible. "It was an evolution for me," says Galbraith. "The whole topic of chemical exposures is like an iceberg, the more you know the more you want to know."

Kids' illnesses linked to chemicals

Statistics continue to show that childhood illnesses and disabilities are on the rise. Some experts, including Dr. Joyce Woods of Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta, believe that the increases are linked to the rise in the number of chemicals we use on a daily basis, especially in our homes. "In 2005, the American Red Cross released the results of a study which found hundreds of chemicals in blood samples taken from umbilical cords," says Woods. "These chemicals were identified as neurotoxins, causes of learning and behaviour disorders and biological mutation. And 180 were



identified as known causes of cancer. Also in 2005, cancer statistics were released showing that cancer has now become the number one cause of death by disease for children."

In addition, says Woods, "environmental exposures have been repeatedly linked to asthma, to attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity. Children are especially vulnerable because their respiratory system is the last system to be developed and it remains very immature for the first few years of life."

Over the last 50 years, approximately 80,000 synthetic chemicals have come into commercial production, with hundreds more added every year. According to the Boston Physicians for Social Reform, of the 2,863 chemicals that were mass-produced in 2002, only 12 were tested for effects on the developing brain. Fetuses, babies and young children are most at risk to exposures because their systems are still in the developing phases.

"In the first three months of fetal development, all of the body parts are developing, so if there's a chemical that affects it, you cannot go back and

correct it," says Dr. Gideon Koren, director of the MotherRisk Program at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. "Later on, the brain continues to develop. If there's too much lead, too much mercury, carbon monoxide, or organic solvents, it may affect brain development, so we need to be concerned throughout pregnancy with what substances the mother is exposed to."

Take precautions

Prospective parents and parents of young children should go through their homes identifying and removing any cleaners, pesticides, personal care and baby care products that contain harmful chemicals, say Kathy Dracup-Harris and Natalie Foeller of the Center of Education for Children's Health and the Environment (www.ceche.net).

Air fresheners are another source of neurotoxins that can outgas and are potentially harmful to unborn babies and young children," says Foeller. "It's best not to use air fresheners and when possible, switch to products with natural ingredients."

The two health care professionals founded their center in 2006 and have been compiling research that links children's health to environmental toxins. They give workshops in person as well as online across North America. They have now produced an in-depth DVD entitled "Better Safe than Sorry: Hidden Exposures Parents Need to Know," with interviews from experts and advice for parents about how to reduce toxins in their homes.

Parents and parents-to-be should not wait to take action, advises Carolyn Galbraith. Her advice: "Avoid harmful products and continue to educate yourself on a daily basis."

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