

Women's Health and the Environment: What We Know

Health Concerns linked to the Environment

A variety of increasingly common women's health concerns may be linked to environmental contaminants.

Breast Cancer: Estrogenic chemicals (that can mimic hormones in our body) are found in a number of common products that we all use, including plastics and body care products. These chemicals may add to a woman's risk of estrogenic cancers, such as breast and ovarian cancer.

Heart Disease: Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death for women in the U.S. Air pollution, tobacco smoke, and second-hand smoke can lead to higher rates of heart disease.

Endometriosis: This disease affects about 10% of women in the U.S. Toxic chemicals like dioxin and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) may increase the incidence of endometriosis.

Diabetes: While nutrition and obesity are important factors affecting this disease, research shows that a wide variety of chemicals including arsenic, bisphenol A, dioxin, PCBs, and some pesticides may contribute to increasing rates of diabetes.



Fertility Challenges: There is still much to learn about the impact of the environment on pregnancy and ability to conceive. Cigarette smoke or solvents like toluene, formaldehyde and perchloroethylene (dry cleaning fluid) have been linked to fertility problems.

Health Factors: A Complex Web

There are many factors at work in determining a woman's overall health. The presence of environmental contaminants is a single factor, and affects individuals differently based on their exposure, overall health, and susceptibility. Factors influencing overall health and wellness include:

Contaminants:

Some chemicals or products are inherently more toxic than others, and both the timing and dose of exposure are also critical in determining the health impact. Most of us carry hundreds of industrial chemicals in our bodies, and more research is needed on how this combination of multiple chemicals can affect our health.

Nutrition and Exercise: Solid nutrition and frequent exercise helps our children grow up healthy and keeps our immune system working well. Children in urban environments often have less access to nutritious food and fewer opportunities for healthy outside play.

Stress: Stress can negatively affect our body and mind, and is related to our overall health. Exercise, healthy food, and time with friends can help reduce stress and benefit our body.

Pregnancy: Hormone changes during pregnancy can affect a woman's long term health. Women having their first child after age 30 or not at all have a 2-3 fold higher breast cancer incidence than those having a first child before 20.



Genetics: Some genes may make us more likely to develop specific diseases. Scientists have identified that women with changes in the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes have higher rates of breast and ovarian cancer.

Social Support: Strong support from our family, friends, faith and community can help us make better lifestyle choices. In turn, this can lead to better health and may reduce the risk of diabetes and obesity.

Life Cycle and the Environment

The timing of exposures at various points in our life cycle can have different effects on our body.

In Utero: Exposures in the womb can result in lifelong health effects. Low-birth weight and increased risk of asthma can result from indoor and outdoor air pollutants. Other chemicals can increase rates of learning and developmental disabilities and adult onset of cancer.

Infants & Children: Babies grow and develop more in the first year of life than at any other time. They also frequently put their hands in their mouths and crawl on the floor; both of these habits cause them to ingest contaminants in household dust like lead and flame retardants. Children eat, drink and breathe more per pound than do adults, which can magnify their ingestion of toxic chemicals.

Teens: Developmental changes during the teenage years can make a woman vulnerable to chemical exposures, especially those that affect the hormone system. Teens begin choosing their own make up and body care products, and many are using more than 10 products daily. It is unknown what health impacts the combined, repeated absorption of chemicals in these products may have on teens and young adults.

Pregnancy: A woman's body is the first environment for all humans, and the placenta does not protect the fetus from all environmental contaminants. Chemicals used in the home or

on the job, like pesticides or personal care products containing phthalates, can harm development.

Menopause: Lifelong exposure to contaminants may alter the onset of menopause. Bone degradation accelerated by

menopause can release toxins stored in the bones. Early onset of menopause may increase the risk for heart disease and stroke; estrogen levels are reduced in the body and no longer protect against these diseases.



Information on this document is paraphrased from *What We Know: New Science Linking our Health and the Environment*, 2007.

Full document, references, and more info are available at www.womenshealthandenvironment.org/toolkit

Additional resources:

Clean New York

Protecting New York's people and communities from toxic chemicals

www.clean-ny.org



Environmental Health News

A service that aggregates and digests news related to health and the environment

www.environmentalhealthnews.org



The JustGreen Partnership

A coalition of 50 organizations, representing over 1 million New Yorkers, working for environmental health and justice

www.just-green.org



Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families

A nationwide effort to pass smart federal policies that protect us from toxic chemicals

www.saferchemicals.org



SAFER States

Network of state-based collaborations championing solutions to protect public health and communities from toxic chemicals

www.saferstates.org



The Endocrine Disruption Exchange

Learn about the impact of chemicals on fetal development through an interactive pre-natal timeline

www.endocrinedisruption.com



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