

Women's Health and Environmental Toxins

This article highlights the serious issue of declining health for millions of people, especially women, (and animals) due to environmental toxins in the environment, the air, the soil, the work-place and the home. This is a topic that is not covered nearly enough with regards to endometriosis.

Many scientists as well as doctors are beginning to believe that endometriosis may well have a strong link caused by these toxins. But unfortunately this whole subject is pushed under the carpet. Please read this article and take this information on board, and if you can address some of the problems of toxins in your own life and environment, then please do so, for the sake of your health and the health of your family.

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Study: Women Bear Brunt of Environmental Toxins

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A California study calls for further investigation into how environmental toxins affect women's health. It estimates the health care cost of U.S. women's environmentally associated diseases is \$12.2 billion annually.

SAN FRANCISCO (WOMENSENEWS)--The push to link environmental safety to women's rights gained research footing last week with the release of a new report called Confronting Toxic Contamination in Our Communities:

Women's Health and California's Future.

Released by the Women's Foundation of California, a grant-making organization based in San Francisco, the report on contaminants and women's health focuses on how women's biology and role in society makes them bear the brunt of environmental toxins.

Women often work closely with potentially toxic chemicals and preliminary research suggests that their physiology is more conducive to absorbing and carrying these chemicals, according to the report. Perhaps most notable about the report, however, is that it points out how little is known about how environmental toxins affect women. Data that takes gender and ethnicity into account is limited, for instance. Historically, women have not been the primary subjects of occupational studies. Of the gender-specific studies that have been done, most focus on reproductive health and newborns.

Fat-Soluble Toxins at Issue

The report notes that research indicates women, with as much as 10 percent more body fat than men, are able to store more fat-soluble toxic materials. These toxins have been tentatively linked to breast cancer and hormone disruption. Many fat-soluble synthetic chemicals, such as flame-retardants, are probable or known carcinogens, the report found. Women transfer toxins to

children in utero and through breast milk, which some researchers suggest can affect fetal development and childhood growth.

The estimated U.S. health care costs of diseases affecting women that have a "strong environmental association" total \$12.2 billion, according to the report. These diseases include breast cancer, birth defects, autoimmune disease and infertility. The cost to women beyond health care include lost wages, diminished quality of life and other tolls that environmental researchers are just beginning to track, the report indicated.

"We want to ensure that the health of all Californians remains a high priority on the policy agenda," said Patti Chang, president and chief executive officer of the Women's Foundation of California. "Especially for those disproportionately impacted--low income women and women of color." Low-income and minority women tend to work or live near environmental toxins, the report said. For instance, many low-income women work as manicurists, housecleaners and factory workers, all occupations that require handling chemicals.

Cleaner House-Cleaning Products

Reducing women's exposure to chemicals shouldn't be left up to just politicians, the report suggests. One group of housecleaners in the San Francisco Bay Area formed environmental cleaning cooperatives that switched from bleaches and other strong chemicals to vinegar, vegetable soap and baking soda. By replacing two conventional all-purpose and glass cleaning products with more natural--and cheaper--cleaning agents, such as vinegar, each cooperative is reducing exposure to pollution by 85 percent, or 1,800 pounds per year, according to the report. And, the housecleaners report fewer headaches, spells of dizziness and skin irritations.

The report pulls together data from various studies and recommends reducing the amount of toxins in the environment in the state and across the country. Authors advocate a first-do-no-harm approach, meaning that chemicals should be more fully tested before they are approved for use.

The foundation that published the report also called on government and businesses to provide safer alternatives to toxic chemicals, as well as collaboration among groups to advocate for policy reforms and further scientific studies. They also seek to pass the burden of environmental cleanup to the producers, rather than taxpayers, by requiring producers to pay for Superfund site cleanups in Silicon Valley, for instance, where the most Superfund sites in the state are concentrated.

They also call for better research and data on the role of gender in environmental exposure and expanded efforts to monitor human exposure to toxic chemicals.

Biomonitoring Push

This so-called biomonitoring--or study of the amount of pollution in the human body--is gaining popularity among public health experts. The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta is offering grants to states to conduct biomonitoring projects. A California state bill introduced this year would have established a biomonitoring project within the Department of Health Services, using breast milk as a marker. The bill was killed because of the state's financial crisis in this year's legislative session, though state Senator Deborah Ortiz, a Democrat, said she would reintroduce the legislation.

"In terms of treatment, care, and lost productivity, the cost of chronic diseases possibly caused by exposure to contaminants is staggering," said Ortiz. "What is unknown and perhaps unknowable, is the cost in human terms, such as the physical and emotional suffering of the individuals and families affected and the loss of human potential across the entire spectrum of the population."

The report appears as a high-profile lawsuit against IBM, the White Plains, N.Y., computer giant, gets underway in Silicon Valley. Alida Hernandez, 73, an employee at the company's disk drive plant since 1977 developed breast cancer after retiring in 1991. She is one of two former workers alleging that the company created a hazardous environment that made them sick. The other plaintiff is a man who developed lymphoma two years after retiring from the company. About 250 other former IBM workers from plants around the country are also suing, alleging that industrial chemicals used in assembling the disk drives and computer chips are cancer-causing.

Body Burden Laws

Scientists and doctors suspect a link between environmental toxins and many of today's most prevalent medical conditions, such as asthma, autism, cancer and endometriosis. But with so many chemicals in the environment, finding the so-called smoking gun is nearly impossible. In response, California has passed a number of laws to reduce our so-called "body burden," or the amount of synthetic chemicals found in the human body.

California was the first state to ban thermometers and other products containing mercury, in 2001. Today, hospitals in the state participate in a program that provides incentives to remove all medical equipment containing mercury. Mercury is a neurotoxin linked to infertility in women and men, tremors, impaired vision and paralysis. President George W. Bush submitted a proposal to Congress that environmental groups said would weaken industrial emission rules, called the Clear Skies Initiative. Compared to current law under the Clean Air Act, the Bush plan would allow three times more mercury emissions, more other chemical emissions, and would delay cleanup efforts, according to the National Resources Defense Council.

In August, California lawmakers adopted the first ban on the manufacturing, distribution and sale of flame- retardants, or polybrominated diphenyl ethers

(PBDEs), starting in 2008. These flame-retardants--long banned in Europe--are found in carpets, home furnishings, computers and many other everyday products. Support for the legislation, sponsored by Assembly Leader Wilma Chan, a Democrat representing Oakland, was bolstered by a widely reported study that found high levels of these chemicals in the breast milk and breast tissue of women in the San Francisco Bay Area

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