

Environmental chemicals and breast cancer



What you should know

There are many factors that can increase a woman's chances of developing breast cancer. Exposure to harmful chemicals is an important, and often overlooked, risk factor. Women can be exposed to harmful chemicals in air, drinking water, food, household dust, and consumer products.

Chemicals can influence breast cancer risk in different ways. They can damage DNA causing a cancerous tumor to form; they can make breast cells grow uncontrollably; and they can change the way the breast develops, leaving it vulnerable to carcinogens.

Endocrine disruptors (EDCs)

Scientists are especially interested in a group of chemicals called endocrine disruptors (EDCs). These are chemicals that interfere with the body's natural system of hormones. Some EDCs cause cells to make more estrogen and progesterone—a known risk factor for breast cancer. EDCs are used in personal care products, furniture, food packaging, building materials, and many other everyday items.

Some women are more exposed than others to EDCs because of where they live, where they work, or the products they use. These differences in exposures can lead to health disparities.

While scientists continue to learn more about chemicals and breast cancer, taking simple steps to limit your exposure to harmful chemicals in your daily life is one more thing you can do to reduce your risk of breast cancer.



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Researching the Environment and Women's Health

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Take-Home Tips



Limit exposure to exhaust from diesel and gasoline engines. Support anti-idling and fuel efficiency regulations.



Use a fan that vents to the outside when you cook and open windows periodically to increase ventilation in the home.



Read the label. Choose personal care products that don't contain endocrine disrupting chemicals such as parabens, phthalates, and benzophenone. Avoid fragrance.



Steer clear of pesticides. Eat organic as much as possible and control household pests with gels, baits, or sticky traps.



Harmful chemicals in consumer products accumulate in house dust. Keep dust levels low by vacuuming with a HEPA filter and wiping surfaces with a damp rag or mop.



Avoid permanent hair dyes and chemical straighteners. Embrace your natural hair color!



Refrain from using stain- and water-resistant sprays on rugs, furniture, or other textiles.



Take Action. Ask your favorite brands and stores to carry products with safer chemicals and join campaigns to get chemicals of concern out of consumer products.

Resources

Detox Me, a free mobile app by Silent Spring Institute:
detoxmeapp.org

The Breast Cancer & Environment Research Program,
National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences/
National Cancer Institute: bcerp.org