

Babies exposed to hazardous chemicals in the womb

Unborn babies are being exposed in the womb to potentially harmful man-made chemicals found in perfumes, antibacterial soaps, pesticides, plastics, and other everyday products, according to new research commissioned by WWF and Greenpeace Netherlands. Research into maternal and umbilical cord blood, published last week in a study entitled "[A Present for Life](#)," reveals that known or suspected hazardous substances present in everyday household products are entering babies' bodies through their pre-natal lifeline: the umbilical cord.

The chemicals include some which are known to affect physical and mental development in animals. The sensitivity of a developing baby to low level chemical exposure, either singly or in complex mixtures, remains largely unknown.

"Babies feeding through the umbilical cord are exposed to toxic chemicals from products like vinyl plastics, cleaning products, electronics and perfumes," said Helen Perivier, Toxics Campaigner for Greenpeace International.

"It is shocking that such chemicals are in the human body at any stage of our life, let alone at the very start, when the child is most vulnerable. Governments need to act and require industries to substitute these contaminating chemicals with safer alternatives."

The chemicals in question are contained in countless items ranging from food tins and electrical goods to pesticides, deodorants, and toothpastes. They include artificial musks, used to add scent to perfumes and perfumed products, perfluorinated compounds, used in water-repellent coatings and to prepare non-stick surfaces such as teflon, and flame-retardants suspected of causing learning and behavioural problems in animals

Also found was the antibacterial agent [triclosan](#), which is classified under EU law as 'very toxic to aquatic organisms'. Triclosan is found in hundreds of common everyday products, including nearly half of all commercial soaps. In addition to soaps, triclosan is found in deodorants, toothpastes, cosmetics, fabrics and plastics. A Swedish study (Daily News, [12/12/01](#)) found triclosan in human breast milk in three out of five women, but this is the first study to find triclosan in cord blood. About 50 per cent of the cord blood samples tested for triclosan contained concentrations of 0.5 to 5.0 ng/g (nanograms per gram) serum.

The widespread use of antibacterial products containing triclosan has led to serious concerns about antibacterial resistance. Numerous studies have found that triclosan promotes the emergence of bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics. Triclosan has also been linked to the formation of dioxin, a highly carcinogenic substance.

"It is urgent that we end the loophole that permits industry to continue using chemicals of very high concern by claiming adequate control of their use, even when safer alternatives exist," said Karl Wagner, Director of WWF's DetoX Campaign.

"If these chemicals are 'adequately controlled', as industry claims, how do they end up in unborn babies?"

Proposed new EU legislation on chemicals, REACH, gives Europe a crucial opportunity to take the necessary action to protect humans and the environment from the effects of harmful chemicals and to make producers responsible for the impacts of their products.

Greenpeace and WWF are calling on legislators to put the interests of public health and the environment first, by ensuring that the worst chemicals are identified and phased out, and by making it obligatory to substitute toxic chemicals with safer alternatives.

TAKE ACTION: When used in hospitals and other health care settings, or for persons with weakened immune systems, triclosan represents an important health care and sanitary tool. Outside of these settings, it is unnecessary, and the constant exposure to triclosan becomes

a health and environmental hazard. The best solution to preventing infections is good old soap and water. Make sure you read all labels when buying soaps and other toiletry products to ensure that triclosan is not included. Also be on the lookout for Microban and Irgasan, which are other names for triclosan. Consult our [Triclosan factsheet](#) for a list of products containing triclosan (some, like Teva sandals and kitchen knives, may surprise you) and for more detailed information on alternatives to triclosan.

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