

The top 5 actions parents can take to reduce child exposure to toxic chemicals at home

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Leading Canadian health and environmental experts today issued a list of the top five ways parents can protect their children from toxic substances in and around the home.

Controlling house dust; switching to less-toxic, fragrance-free cleaners; taking extreme care with renovation projects; avoiding certain types and uses of [plastics](#); and choosing fish that are low in [mercury](#) are the five priority actions recommended by the Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment (CPCHE) to reduce common sources of [toxic exposure](#) associated with child health risks.

"If [parents](#) take simple actions in these five areas, they can significantly reduce their children's exposures to toxics – and even save money," says Erica Phipps, CPCHE Partnership Director.

"A clean environment is one of the greatest gifts we can give our children and our grandchildren. It ensures they have the greatest chance of success, both in their early developmental years and throughout their lives," said Ontario Minister of the Environment, John Wilkinson. "The Ontario government is committed to ensuring that parents have the knowledge they need to minimize their children's exposure to toxic materials. That is why the Top Five Actions are a must-read for all parents."

The Top 5 Ways for Parents to Prevent Child

Exposure to Toxics at Home

1) Bust that dust

Frequent vacuuming or wet mopping, and dusting with a damp cloth, top the list of recommended measures.

"House dust is a major source of children's exposures to [toxic substances](#) including lead which, even at very low levels, is known to be harmful to the developing brain." says Prof. Bruce Lanphear of Simon Fraser University, a world-leading expert on children's environmental health who serves as an advisor to CPCHE.

"The developing brain of a fetus or young child is particularly susceptible to the neurotoxic effects of lead, mercury and other toxic chemicals," Dr. Lanphear adds. "An infant will absorb about 50 per cent of ingested lead, whereas an adult absorbs about 10 per cent. This, combined with children's frequent hand-to-mouth behaviour, places children at much greater risk."

In May, Health Canada researchers released data from the Canadian House Dust Study that showed measurable concentrations of bioaccessible lead (lead that can be absorbed by the body) in all homes tested, with values ranging from 8 to 3916 parts per million (ppm), as measured from analysis of the contents of vacuum cleaner bags.

CPCHE's recommendations, which are being presented to parents in a brochure and on the CPCHE website, focus on simple steps that parents can take now without making major changes. CPCHE will release a short video later this year to reach more parents with the recommendations.

"Expectant and new parents, in particular, need practical advice to help

them safeguard their children from health risks — such as learning and behavioural disorders, asthma, cancer and certain birth defects — that researchers have linked to toxic chemicals found in and around the home," says Phipps. "The time of greatest vulnerability is in the womb."

2) Go green when you clean

Parents can reduce their family's exposure to toxic chemicals and save money by switching to simple, non-toxic cleaners.

Baking soda is a good scouring powder for tubs and sinks, and vinegar mixed with water works well for cleaning windows, surfaces and floors, the experts point out. Avoiding the use of air "fresheners" and selecting fragrance-free laundry detergents can reduce children's exposures to the chemicals used to make [fragrance](#) or "parfum," some of which have been linked to disruption of normal hormone function.

Echoing the advice of physician groups, including the Canadian Medical Association, the experts also advise against the use of antibacterial soaps.

3) Renovate right

If families are upgrading their homes, CPCHE recommends that pregnant women and children stay away from areas being renovated to avoid exposure to contaminant-laden renovation dust and toxic fumes from products such as paints, caulking and glues. Care must be taken to seal off the area being renovated from the rest of the home using plastic sheeting, and careful dust-busting is essential during and after any renovation or repair project.

4) Get drastic with plastic

Parents can take protective action by being selective in their use of plastic products, especially when it comes to serving and storing food. The experts caution parents not to use plastic containers or wrap in the microwave, even if the label says "microwave safe," as the chemicals in the plastic can migrate into the food or beverage. Eating fresh and frozen foods whenever possible will reduce exposure to Bisphenol-A (BPA), a chemical used in the lining of most food and drink cans. BPA is associated with a wide range of potential health effects, including impacts on the developing brain and disruption of endocrine (hormone) function.

The experts also caution about plastic products made of PVC, commonly known as vinyl, which contains a class of chemical plasticizers known as phthalates that are associated with diverse health effects. Although phthalates are banned from some children's toys as of June 2011, many other vinyl products are still on the market, such as bibs, shower curtains and children's raincoats. The experts advise parents to discard older toys and teething rings that are made of this soft plastic.

5) Dish safer fish

To reduce children's exposure to mercury, a metal that is toxic to the brain, the experts advise choosing varieties of fish that are low in mercury, such as Atlantic mackerel, herring, rainbow trout, wild or canned salmon and tilapia. If serving canned tuna, look for "light" varieties, as these are lower in mercury than albacore or "white" tuna. If you catch fish in local waters, check your province or territory's advisories to see whether it is safe to eat, the experts add.

CPCHE's current work to reach prospective and new parents in Ontario with information on reducing children's exposure to toxic substances is funded by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment via the Ontario Public Health Association as the lead CPCHE partner.

CPCHE's new brochure is available at www.healthyenvironmentforkids.ca. The brochure is also being disseminated as an information supplement in the July issue of Today's Parent to the magazine's Ontario readership.

Provided by Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and Environment

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