

CONGRESSIONAL INFORMATION SHEET

Reason for Concern

Tens of thousands of chemicals are used in American industry, placed in products, and released to our environment, with virtually no information on the potential consequences for human health and little oversight by the government. No legal requirements exist for ingredient labeling on household products.

What the Science Shows, and Why It Matters

Research has linked cleaning chemicals such as monoethanolamine (MEA) and ammonium quaternary compounds (ingredients found in common household products) with asthma and reproductive harm.

Women and Reproductive Harm

Certain chemicals used in household cleaning products have been associated with reproductive harm such as decreases in fertility, menstrual changes, changes in the onset of puberty, cancers of the reproductive organs, miscarriage, premature birth, and other effects. When a pregnant mother is exposed to chemicals, this exposure can also impact the developing child and lead to developmental effects such as birth defects, low birth weight, impacts on cognitive development, or other harmful outcomes.

- While gender roles have changed culturally over time, women today are still doing over 70% of housework in the average home.
- Pregnant women exposed to certain chemicals in their work environments were significantly more likely to have children with birth defects.
- Nationally, over 1/3 of housekeeping cleaners are Latina women, while another 20% are African-American women.

Asthma

Certain chemicals in common cleaning products have been associated with increased prevalence of asthma, exacerbations of asthma symptoms, and respiratory ailments.

- The incidence of asthma is rising in the U.S. An estimated 20 million people, including 6.1 million children, have asthma.
- Asthma is the most common serious chronic childhood disease, and is the third-ranking cause of hospitalization in children under age 15.
- A January 2001 study published by the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* reported that janitorial workers have twice the rate of occupational asthma than other workers, clearly demonstrating a link between asthma and exposure to cleaning chemicals.

Current Regulatory Issues

- Agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) all of which have the expertise to regulate chemicals found in these products, lack the jurisdiction to do so.
- The Consumer Product Safety Commission, the agency with the most relevant jurisdiction over household cleaning products, has only 480 staff responsible for

- monitoring over 15,000 consumer products nationwide. As a result, they tend to limit their focus to acute hazards such as poisoning.
- Industrial products are required by OSHA to have a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) that lists ingredients and health hazards associated with a particular product, although MSDSs are often incomplete. No such requirement exists for household products.

What Can Our Congressional Representatives Do?

We are in need of a comprehensive policy that addresses the use of chemicals in consumer products in a consistent and accurate manner in order to protect citizen health and safety.

- **The U.S. government must enact legislation that requires manufacturers/companies to fully disclose all ingredients on the product label.**
- **The U.S. government must regulate chemical testing; manufacturers/companies must prove chemicals are safe before inclusion in consumer products.**

Once we know all of the ingredients that are included in consumer products, we can begin to evaluate toxic chemicals and their effects on human health. With a comprehensive policy on chemicals, we can begin to replace toxins with safe alternatives.

Contact Women's Voices for the Earth at (406) 543-3747, wve@womenandenvironment.org, or www.womenandenvironmen.org for more information.