

# Environmental Hazards in Pregnancy



On a daily basis we are exposed to environmental hazards that we may not be aware of. They may be in our homes, workplaces or in the air around us. A growing body of scientific research shows that some of these substances may affect male and female fertility and the health of an unborn child. Exposure to these hazards during pregnancy may cause negative health effects for the mother and baby.

## *Hazards to avoid in pregnancy*

The negative health effects that may be caused by exposure to these hazards include: miscarriage, still birth, delayed fetal growth, birth defects and increased risk for certain illnesses in the baby. Although the amount, timing and length of exposure influence the impact, in some cases, even low levels of exposure may put the fetus at risk.

**Common substances that pregnant women should minimize their exposure to include:**

### **Paints**

- ⊗ most paints made in Canada do not have high levels of lead or other toxic metals, although small amounts are still present in some exterior paints
- ⊗ oil based paints may give off dangerous organic compounds that reduce indoor air quality

### **Organic Solvents**

- ⊗ may be present in cleaning products, cosmetics, aerosol sprays, disinfectants, paint strippers and thinners, varnish and many other household products

### **Pesticides**

- ⊗ contain ingredients that kill insects, fungi, plants, rodents, etc.
- ⊗ there are over 3000 pesticide products available in Canada

### **Insect Repellants and Insecticides**

- ⊗ many contain the powerful chemical DEET

### **Mercury**

- ⊗ a toxic material that does not break down in the environment
- ⊗ in water, bacteria changes mercury to methylmercury, a more toxic form that is found in certain fish

### **Asbestos**

- ⊗ can be found in the home in: old vinyl floor and ceiling tiles, old shingles and insulation, siding, stove, furnace and pipe insulation
- ⊗ there is little scientific research on the effects of exposure to asbestos during pregnancy



## *What can you do to reduce your exposure?*

### **In your home:**

- Use non-toxic household cleaners, for example, baking soda and vinegar for general cleaning
- Open windows in your home if using cleaning chemicals
- Plan renovations when you are not home and ventilate the area well
- Have someone paint for you if possible and ensure good ventilation by opening windows and/or using fans
- Use latex rather than oil based paints
- Avoid using pesticides around your home and garden
- Apply insect repellent sparingly and use only those with less than 50% DEET
- Eat organic foods when possible
- Wash fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating to remove pesticide residue
- Follow Health Canada's guidelines for fish consumption during pregnancy

### **At work:**

- Obtain knowledge of what hazards you may be exposed to and limit your exposure as much as possible
- Ensure you are working in a well ventilated area
- Wear protective clothing, for example, gloves and a mask when recommended
- Remove contaminated clothing as soon as possible
- Avoid direct contact with all chemicals
- Speak to your employer about modifying your work depending on level of exposures

### **Resources:**

Best Start- Your Health Before Pregnancy Environment: The World Around You and Your Baby

**[www.healthbeforepregnancy.ca/environment.htm](http://www.healthbeforepregnancy.ca/environment.htm)**

Eco Perth. To download a Non-Toxic Cleaning Kit visit

**[www.ecoperth.on.ca/Projects/Downloads/clean\\_flyer.pdf](http://www.ecoperth.on.ca/Projects/Downloads/clean_flyer.pdf)**

Health Canada, Nutrition for a Healthy Pregnancy - Prenatal Nutrition Guidelines for Health Professionals - Fish and Omega 3 Fatty Acids

**[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/pubs/nutrition/omega3-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/pubs/nutrition/omega3-eng.php)**



Durham Health Connection Line  
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[durham.ca](http://durham.ca)