



# THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

## Are You or Your Family Being Exposed to Formaldehyde at Home, Work, or School?

This June, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services officially upgraded formaldehyde from a probable carcinogen to a known carcinogen (cancer-causing material).

But cancer is just one of the ways that this toxic can harm our health. According to the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA), short-term exposure to formaldehyde can cause pulmonary edema, pneumonia, bronchial reactions, and death. Other impacts include eye damage and blindness, asthma-like breathing problems, skin rashes and itching, dry or sore throat, burning sensations and itching in the nose, redness, tearing, nasal congestion, and other allergy-like symptoms. Long-term exposure can lead to lung cancer, myeloid leukemia, and cancer of the nose and sinuses.

Workers in certain fields are especially vulnerable to its effects, including those in medical labs, nail salons, the funeral industry, and factories that make home furnishings and personal care products.

Yes, you read that right. The material that's used by mortuaries to embalm bodies and as an industrial fungicide and disinfectant is entering our homes via plywood, particle board, fiberboard, glues, permanent press fabrics, and health and beauty products.

In 2007, the California Air Resources Board

(CARB) voted to phase in formaldehyde emission limits for composite wood products, and in 2010 the federal government voted to do the same. While this is a good step, these incoming rules only apply to some products and don't stop all exposures. Thus, it's vital that we take action to protect ourselves too.

### Ways to reduce your exposure

■ **Be cautious when buying the products listed in the box** (right). Unfortunately, product labels don't generally note if they contain formaldehyde, so it's up to us to know where it usually hides.

■ **Buy products that are formaldehyde-free when available.** You can find such options, for instance, with pressed wood products and certain personal care products.

■ **Identify problem products by noticing if you or others tend to have the listed symptoms** when around certain items.

■ **Wash all new clothing before wearing.**

■ **When refinishing wood, especially not solid wood,** wear a mask and have adequate ventilation.

■ **Don't allow smoking inside.** It's a leading source of formaldehyde exposure and indoor pollution.

■ **Ventilate your house well, and air it out often.**



### Products That Can Contain Formaldehyde

- **Building materials**, such as decking, doors, glues, foam insulation, acoustical ceilings, paints, and paint thinners.
- **Composite wood furniture**, including couches, shelving, baby and office furniture, and anything with particle board, pressed board, or plywood.
- **Textile items** such as wall hangings, carpets, upholstery, and bedding.
- **Clothing**, especially items marked wrinkle-free or permanent press, including baby items.
- **Household cleansers**, disinfectants, laundry aids, air fresheners, and carpet cleaners.
- **Personal care products**, especially nail polish, hair straighteners, baby products, and antibacterial soaps and shampoos.

Note: Folks using Brazilian Blow-out products should confirm that they're actually formaldehyde-free; even those labelled as such have been found to contain formaldehyde. (See [www.osha.gov/SLTC/formaldehyde/hazard\\_alert.html](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/formaldehyde/hazard_alert.html).)

Other common formaldehyde-exposure routes include: **new cars** (it's a key component in that "new car smell"), **car exhaust**, **cigarette smoke**, and the **preserved biological specimens** used by teachers and students.

■ **Write your government representatives to call for stronger laws** to fully remove formaldehyde from a broader range of products.

For more information, see: [www.naturalnews.com/032765\\_formaldehyde\\_carcinogenic.html](http://www.naturalnews.com/032765_formaldehyde_carcinogenic.html) • [www.scienceblogs.com/thepumphantle/2011/06/department\\_of\\_health\\_and\\_human.php](http://www.scienceblogs.com/thepumphantle/2011/06/department_of_health_and_human.php) • [www.osha.gov/SLTC/formaldehyde](http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/formaldehyde) • [www.bdlaw.com/news-898.html](http://www.bdlaw.com/news-898.html)

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"Dear Patricia, I enjoy reading your STEP newsletter and always learn something to improve my efforts to conserve and protect our environment. Thank you!"

~ Janet Anderson, Sebastopol

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## Significant Levels of Mercury & PCBs Found in California Fish

A recent study by the California State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) has found worrying levels of mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in California's coastal sport fish, plus lesser levels of other toxics, including DDT, chloro-danes, and dieldrin.

This survey, which SWRCB describes as the largest of its kind, includes information from 42 locations, with a special focus on San Francisco and Los Angeles. It found that 19% of the coastline had fish with mercury levels significantly higher than the recommended maximums for children and women of childbearing age. Mercury has been linked to nervous system developmental problems and learning disabilities in children and teenagers.

A key way that mercury gets into fish is through the burning of fossil fuels, especially coal. It can also be dispersed via cement plants, metal smelting, and other manufacturing. Mercury bioaccumulates up the food chain, so top aquatic predators can carry concentrations a million times higher than the level in their water.

The PCBs being found also harm our health, by increasing the risk of certain cancers and damaging our livers, digestive tracts, and neurological systems. Although PCBs are now largely banned because of their environmental persistence, their

legacy remains. This study shows once again that our use of toxics comes back to haunt us, making it wise to stop the initial dispersal.

For more on this, including which fish are safer to consume, see [www.sfei.org/contaminants-fish-california-coast](http://www.sfei.org/contaminants-fish-california-coast), [www.oehha.ca.gov/fish/chems/index.html](http://www.oehha.ca.gov/fish/chems/index.html), [www.nrdc.org/health/effects/mercury/sources.asp](http://www.nrdc.org/health/effects/mercury/sources.asp), and [www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/seafoodwatch.aspx](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/seafoodwatch.aspx).

SOURCE: [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/226849.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/226849.php)

## Developmental Disabilities Are Increasing

According to a study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and published in *Pediatrics*, the number of U.S. children with developmental disabilities (DDs) has risen to nearly one in six. These DDs include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, cerebral palsy, blindness, hearing loss, seizures, stuttering or stammering, and other developmental delays. All of these cost us greatly, both emotionally and financially.

The CDC reported that, from 1997 to 2008, the percentage of children with at least one of these conditions rose from less than 13% to more than 15% — representing an added 1.8 million kids. Most of the increase was in ADHD, while autism showed the fastest rate of growth.

Unfortunately, the CDC's webpage on this, as well as the related Reuters article, didn't discuss the scientifically-demonstrated connections between these illnesses and our frequent exposures to toxics through our food, cleansers, pest control products, and household furnishings. As a result, they missed an opportunity to reduce these exposures and thus improve our health.

However, you can protect your loved ones by learning more about these links. For helpful information, see the STEP Index at [www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html).

SOURCES: [www.cdc.gov/features/dsDevDisabilities](http://www.cdc.gov/features/dsDevDisabilities) • [www.reuters.com/article/2011/](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/)

05/23/us-developmental-disabilities-inching-up-idUSTRE74M0QN20110523

## EPA Banning Many Home Rat Poison Products

In past issues, we've cautioned about the risks that rat poisons present to children, pets, and wildlife. Nontoxic approaches usually produce better results, which is why even mainstream pest control companies are using them. Nevertheless, uninformed home owners can buy toxic options and risk harm to themselves and others.

So I was glad to hear that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is moving to ban residential sales of the most toxic rat and mouse poisons, as well as most loose bait and pellet products. It's also requiring that all new such poisons be enclosed in bait stations.

According to an agency representative, "These changes are essential to reduce the thousands of accidental exposures of children that occur every year from rat and mouse control products, and to protect household pets." The American Association of Poison Control Centers indicates that it receives 12,000 to 15,000 reports each year of children under the age of six being exposed to these products.

Manufacturers received notice of this change in 2008, to give them time to make the transition. Some decided not to modify their offerings and these items will be removed from the U.S. market.

For more information on the products involved and alternative methods, see [www.epa.gov/pesticides/mice-and-rats](http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/mice-and-rats) and the STEP Index under *Rodents*.



### ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. STEP is a project of the **City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. STEP's mission is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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