

# THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



## Prioritizing Your Toxics Reduction

Recently, I was in a local store when a friend saw me and asked if a particular product was toxic and to be avoided. My quick assessment was that it might have a small risk, but she'd probably only use it once for a short time, and not near her body, so the net risk was likely minor. Still, I hesitated to say that, wondering if I would be failing in my job to warn?

But then I saw that it actually can be helpful for us to know when a product has a smaller risk, so that we can worry less overall and focus our detoxing efforts where they'll be most fruitful in protecting our health, children, communities, and planet.

### A simple model

So where do we start in prioritizing which toxics to avoid in our lives?

Let's begin with my simplified summary of how toxicology assesses a product's impact on an organism (i.e., a person, creature, or plant).

**1) Toxicity.** Is a small amount of it very harmful to this organism? Or, at the other extreme, is even a large amount not very harmful?

**2) Exposure.** How much exposure is the organism receiving, in what ways, how often, and for how long?

**3) Vulnerability.** Is this organism especially vulnerable, such

as a child, pregnant woman, or sick or elderly person?

Now, before I discuss how we can use this model, I do need to say that I think that toxicology's approach is helpful but also limited, because it's impossible to fully quantify these three elements. That's because:

**1) We don't have toxicity information on many everyday materials,** and it's unlikely that we'll spend the large amounts of money needed to rectify that (see over).

**2) We can't ever know how much we're exposed to each material in a day,** let alone the cumulative and synergistic combinations.

**3) It's impossible to really pin down the unique vulnerability of each person** to each material.

That's why I ultimately think it's much cheaper, easier, and saner for our culture to avoid releasing most of these toxics in the first place, and I encourage you to act for that.

### Making your plan of action

However, in the meantime, how can you prioritize the toxics to reduce in your life? My suggestion is for you to understand your specific **vulnerabilities** and overall goals, then reduce your exposure first to the materials that are **most toxic** and/or **most prevalent** in your life.

Here are some steps you can take to do this. You can get more on these topics via our Online Index at [www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html).

**1) Evaluate the products you use at home, work, etc.** To do this:

a) Explore the labels. First look for the key words Danger, Warning, and

## Quick Steps

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collection Day is on Tuesday January 6,** from 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, call (707) 795-2025 or (877) 747-1870 at least 24 hours beforehand. You can also drop items at the Household Toxics Facility. Get more specifics at [www.recyclenow.org](http://www.recyclenow.org).

■ **You can get email delivery of the TNS newsletter.** Folks in or out of City limits can sign up at [www.healthyworld.org/EList](http://www.healthyworld.org/EList).

■ **STEP articles are available for reprint or adaptation in your periodical.** Contact me (the editor) for more information!

Caution, which are legally-defined descriptions of acute health risk. Also consider and take seriously the other risks listed on the label, and follow all of its safety directions.

b) Look beyond the labels. They don't reflect all the risks, especially chronic, so get a more accurate risk picture of a product using the information at [www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol5no4.pdf](http://www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol5no4.pdf).

c) Consider evaluating one area of your life at a time. So perhaps once a week you can examine one of these categories, taking notes: Pest control • Pet care • Painting/Building/Remodeling • Cars/Shop • Cleaning supplies • Personal body care • Medical/Health care • Hobbies/Crafts.

d) Ask to see the products that your pest and cleaning services are using, and evaluate them similarly.

**2) Identify the top products you want to replace.** Eliminate the most toxic products first, starting with those labeled Danger or Warning, and especially those to which you and others are most exposed.

**3) Consider what other items in your everyday life might contain toxics,** such as furniture, containers, food, beverages, etc. Look at third-party sources for information, such as our past newsletters. Then prioritize and plan how you'll reduce.

One priority action I suggest including on your list is buying organic

See *Prioritizing*, over



## The EPA's First Final Risk Assessments in 28 Years

We like to think that the government is protecting us from toxic products, on our shelves and in our world. And sometimes that's true.

However, there are also vast areas that are poorly regulated. Consider, for instance, the over 80,000 chemicals used in the U.S. that have never been fully tested for their toxic impacts on our health and environment. The reason, says the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), is that the law tasked with protecting the public from toxics (the Toxic Substances Control Act, or TSCA) actually "makes it nearly impossible for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to take regulatory action against dangerous chemicals, even those ... known to cause cancer or other serious health effects."

As a result, it's been an astonishing 28 years since the EPA has released a final risk assessment for a chemical using its TSCA authority (since asbestos in 1986). According to biochemist Richard Denison of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), "The absence of any mandate or deadline under the current law for EPA to identify, assess, and manage

high-risk chemicals has stymied the Agency's efforts for decades."

So it's a big deal that the EPA recently released final risk assessments for four chemicals. Two of them — trichloroethylene (TCE) and dichloromethane (DCM) — showed serious evidence of both acute (immediate) and chronic harm, including cancer.

These findings mean that the EPA must now initiate actions to address the risks that it has identified. Hopefully it'll do so in a timely manner, but in the past it's been blocked in its followthrough.

Denison points to that history as yet another reason why we must give TSCA the power to actually protect us. Various groups have called for this for years, and even the EPA noted this need in its TCE statement. As the Silent Spring Institute says, "How can we make sure it doesn't take another 28 years to evaluate the next chemicals that may harm public health?"

*SOURCES:* <http://blogs.edf.org/health/2014/06/25/epa-releases-final-risk-assessment-for-tce-one-down-84999-to-go> • <http://yosemite.epa.gov/opa/admpress.nsf/bd4379a92ceeeac8525735900400c27/9b8c8609521a27bc85257d420059da44!OpenDocument> • [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toxic\\_Substances\\_Control\\_Act\\_of\\_1976](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toxic_Substances_Control_Act_of_1976) • [www.nrdc.org/health/toxics.asp](http://www.nrdc.org/health/toxics.asp)

### Prioritizing, continued

food and beverages. Mainstream crops are grown with toxics that are shown to remain in the products that we eat, and are found in our bodies, which has been correlated with illness. Do you really want to be eating poison? Also, if you choose *local* organic, you'll help reduce the toxics in our shared local environment.

**4) Ask what products are being used at the places you and your loved ones spend the most time**, including work, school, parks, etc. Are you being exposed without your knowledge? Ask maintenance people or officials if they use toxic materials or have a written policy to avoid them. You can invite cooperation by being curious, friendly, and compassionate. If they do use toxics, perhaps help reduce usage by offer-

ing useful information or inviting other folks to speak up.

**5) Join with others to reduce the toxics allowed in our shared environment**, including our water, air, parks, etc. Our combined people power really can help reduce the harm to ourselves, loved ones, pets, wildlife, and ecosystems.

I hope that these ideas help you in shaping your own path. Our culture is regularly using toxics that are greatly harming our health and environment. But we don't have to live with that. There are people doing good work and offering wonderful options that can lead us towards a healthier world. And I hope that this article and newsletter help you be a part of that!

## Steering Clear of Rat Toxics

In past issues, we've talked about the importance of avoiding toxic rat products, because they can harm children, pets, and wildlife — and cause a stench if rats die within your walls. We've also talked about the EPA's rules, initiated in 2008, to limit use of the most harmful products.

Unfortunately, Reckitt Benckiser, maker of d-CON products, has "challenged every effort to introduce even modest safeguards" in its products, says the group Earthjustice.

So it was good to hear that (after years of pressure from conservation, health, and animal rights groups) the company has finally agreed to follow the EPA's science-based standards and modify its products. The Sierra Club's Sarah Friedman says that this "is an important step toward protecting fragile wildlife species from unnecessarily toxic poisons."

However, I advise you to still be careful shopping, as these unsafe products can be sold in stores even after production stops. Also check that they're not in your home or being used by your pest control service. (Services can use stronger materials; ask for a Material Safety Data Sheet to assess any product they propose.) Learn more about products and actions in our Index under *Rodents* and at [www.saferodentcontrol.org](http://www.saferodentcontrol.org).

*SOURCES:* "d-CON Agrees to Pull Super-Toxic Rat Poisons From Stores," May 30, 2014, [www.earthjustice.org/news/press/2014/d-con-agrees-to-pull-super-toxic-rat-poisons-from-stores](http://www.earthjustice.org/news/press/2014/d-con-agrees-to-pull-super-toxic-rat-poisons-from-stores) • [www2.epa.gov/rodenticides/restrictions-rodenticide-products](http://www2.epa.gov/rodenticides/restrictions-rodenticide-products)

### 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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