



## Perfume Dreams

Like an idealized suitor, **perfume ads entice with flowers, beautiful natural scenes, romance, and even outright seduction.** But, underneath their natural façades, most perfumes are created not from plants but from **petroleum-based synthetics** that can cause immediate and long-term health harm.

In fact, of the more than 3,000 chemicals in fragrances, approximately 80–90% are made from petroleum. **These include toxics**, that are known to cause cancer, birth defects, infertility, nerve system damage, including **toluene, ethanol, acetone, limonene, formaldehyde, benzene derivatives,** and **hexa-chlorophene.** As one website declares, **perfumes are “as romantic as hazardous waste.”**

Take, for example, **toluene.** An Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) study found toluene in every fragrance sample tested. The EPA said it “was most abundant in the auto parts store [and] the fragrance section of the department store.” A potent solvent used in gasoline, tires, glues, and paints, toluene can trigger asthma attacks and cause dizzi-



ness, headaches, reproductive harm, nervous system damage, and cancer. It is designated as hazardous waste.

A wide variety of **beauty and household products** carry synthetic scents, including laundry detergents, dishwashing liquids, air fresheners, disinfectants, shampoos, soaps, deodorants, cosmetics, sunscreen, aftershaves, and colognes. The EPA reportedly even found **chloroform** in fabric softeners!

**While each exposure might seem small, they quickly add up,** and folks are increasingly having adverse reactions. The National Academy of Sciences estimates that “15% of the population experiences hypersensitivity to chemicals found in common household products.”

**Exposure symptoms** can include: headaches, weakness, flu and “hay fever” symptoms, sinusitis, dizziness, difficulty concentrating, mood changes, depression, rashes, swollen lymph glands, muscle aches and spasms, heart palpitations, nausea, stomach cramps, vomiting, inability to breathe, neuromotor dysfunction, seizures, and loss of consciousness. Up to 72% of asthmatics report their asthma is triggered by fragrance.

These toxics are also tied to **long-term diseases**, including cancer, liver disease, birth defects, and Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), a debilitating disease often initiated by exposure to everyday chemicals.

Like second-hand smoke, **these toxics can also impact others.** That’s the reason hospitals, schools, churches, and events are increasingly asking people to avoid wearing scents. And it’s the reason that

Halifax, Nova Scotia, has established fragrance-free policies in most public offices, schools, public transportation, plus many private businesses.

So, you might ask, **isn’t U.S. government regulation protecting us from these toxics?** Unfortunately, no. The FDA doesn’t require pre-market testing, and almost any chemical can be used as a scent. Fragrance formulas are “trade secrets,” so companies aren’t required to even identify ingredients on the label, let alone warn about toxic items. They can merely list “fragrance.” It’s only through lab analysis and other means that people have been able to identify the contents of some scents.

Even when problems are highlighted, the government is slow to respond. In 1986 the National Academy of Sciences identified fragrances as one of six chemical categories that should be a high priority for neurotoxicity testing. (The other groups were insecticides, heavy metals, solvents, food additives, and certain air pollutants.) The FDA still has not taken this advice. Instead, the industry does its own tests — which haven’t included assessing respiratory, neurological, or systemic harm — or the cumulative and synergistic effects of our multiple exposures. They aren’t required to make the tests public or submit them to the FDA for review. They’re also not required to report customers’ adverse reactions. The industry regulates itself and simply claims that its products are safe.

### So What Can You Do?

■ **Check your beauty and household product labels.** If they refer to fragrances but don’t say that they’re from a botanical source (such as natural essential oils), then they likely are petrochemical scents.

■ **Phase out your use of synthetically-scented products,** especially around the young, elderly, ill, or pregnant. **Consider replacement products** that indicate “no artificial fragrances.” For inspiring perfume options, see *Natural Perfumes*, by Mindy Green. Also see *TNS IV/1* for ideas for naturally scenting your cleaning products. (Note: Some chemically-sensitive people have also become

See *Perfumes*, over ...

## Scent-sitivity

Growing up, I didn't have allergies or rashes; like most Boomers, I didn't hear the word "environment" or think about the future much until the 1970s. In the 1980s, some of my friends started making noises about the scent "peelers" in department store mailings, or about not being able to walk down the supermarket's detergent aisle. Some of them looked sickly and wore carbon masks.

I tended to think of those folks as a separate gene pool from me — I've always loved perfumes and weird smells. Then one day I was in my usual morning aerobics class at the gym and noticed a woman near me had a strong antiperspirant smell; nothing unusual. But I started to get a sharp headache and dizziness.

The next time I went to the class, I noticed the smell again — and the dizziness-headache came again. This time I moved to another part of the room, and felt better. Time after time, I tested what happened when I was close to her and farther from her. And I finally was persuaded that there was indeed a substance that bothered me.

That was in the 1980s, and since then I've realized that that experience occurred not long after I was exposed to an agricultural spray at my son's soccer game. The majority of those

attending this game, including the team's 6 – 8 year olds and their families, were in the emergency room that night with acute asthma, including my son and me. (We'd never had asthma before; asthma used to occur genetically but not pop up in adulthood. The epidemiologists don't make that claim anymore.)

There might have been some connection between that experience and the fragrance experience; or maybe it was a coincidence. What's known is that sensitivities and allergies are immune disorders, and one toxic that damages your immune system can make you newly sensitive to other toxics, and vulnerable to other immune system disorders. Since we have so many of these toxics around us all the time, it seems essential to minimize our exposure, and work to lessen their existence.

Speaking of sensitivity being a "disorder" — not everyone thinks of it that way. It's actually good for the rest of us that some people are more sensitive, so they can notice what is unhealthy around us. These "canaries in the coal mine" are becoming quite numerous, and are starting to have a demographic consumer voice. If we can help them get dangerous products corrected or removed, we'll help ourselves before we all start feeling symptoms.

~ Rebecca Dwan

### 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.

**Past issues of TNS** are at <[www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us](http://www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us)>; look under Programs. **An ongoing index by topic** is at <[www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html)>.

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STEP, P. O. Box 1776, Sebastopol CA 95473

Printed on recycled paper.

### Perfumes, continued

sensitized to natural essential oils and other botanical materials.)

■ **Ask your government representatives** to require better perfume labels and standards. And **write the FDA** in support of the citizen labeling petition. (See <[www.ehnca.org/FDApetition/bkgrinfo.htm](http://www.ehnca.org/FDApetition/bkgrinfo.htm)>.)

■ **Share** this information with others. Avoiding synthetic scents can help clear everyone's air. The body you save may be your own!

~ Patricia Dines

For more information, see <[www.ehnca.org](http://www.ehnca.org)> and <[www.fpinva.org](http://www.fpinva.org)>. A list of common chemicals in scents is at <<http://users.lmi.net/~wilworks/ehn20.htm>>. Thank you to Lynn Lawson, Barbara Wilkie, and Betty Bridges for your assistance with this article!

## Managing Ants

With the rains, ants seek shelter like the rest of us. Unfortunately, that can mean they decide to come into our homes. It can be tempting to pull out a pesticide spray, but as our *TNS I/4* issue discussed, pesticides are no more effective than household cleansers, and they expose you and your family to neurological toxics that can harm your health.

For our key ant strategies, download *TNS I/4* at <[www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html)>. Approaches include plugging ants' entry holes and keeping your kitchen very clean. (I call them Housekeeping Ants, because they show me where I need to increase my attention!)

Here are some more approaches that folks have found effective:

■ Put **scout ants** (the first ants you see) outside right away — before they can make a scent trail and return to the nest for their co-workers.

■ Place **cinnamon, nutmeg, salt, chili pepper**, or fresh **rosemary** or **lemon** at the ants' entry point or on their routes to disrupt their trails.

■ **Move the outside garbage can** farther away from the house.

■ **Put a spoonful of honey outside** in a dry spot, so they get fed without having to come inside.

~ Patricia Dines

This article includes suggestions from: Barbara Chasteen, Bill Wilson, Diane Darling, Dian Hardy, Sheryl Munger, and Wildflower. Thank you for your input!

### More Seasonal Tips

Do you want to know more about how to **manage mold** or **create a healthy home for the holidays**?

Download past TNS issues that cover these and other topics using our ongoing index at <[www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html)>. And remember, **winter is the time to cut back your blackberry bushes**.

See *TNS IV/3* for more about our tests using **vinegar** to prevent regrowth.

