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GREATER TORONTO AREA May/June 2009 Issue 45

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Healthy Baby, Healthy Environment

## Slim Down, Shape Up

Keeping the weight off

## Sleep

How Important is it?



# Cleaner Couples = Cleaner & Healthier Babies

By Rahim Habib BSc, ND

**FACT** – a recent US study showed that 287 domestic and industrial chemical pollutants are found in infant umbilical cord blood samples; of these, we know that 180 cause cancer in humans or animals, 217 are toxic to the brain and nervous system, and 208 cause birth defects or abnormal development in animal tests.

The findings from this study have shocked environmental organizations, governments, and consumer health groups the world over. As a result, more tests have begun, though little action has actually taken place. This article looks at how some of these chemicals may influence the health of our future generation. It also discusses how our own fertility can be affected by chemicals found in our everyday environment. It then recommends a role for proactive cleansing ('detoxifying') of prospective parents before they try to have a baby, to reduce such exposures and their possible effects on the future baby, in addition to improving their own individual adult health.

## Chemicals in our Newborn Babes

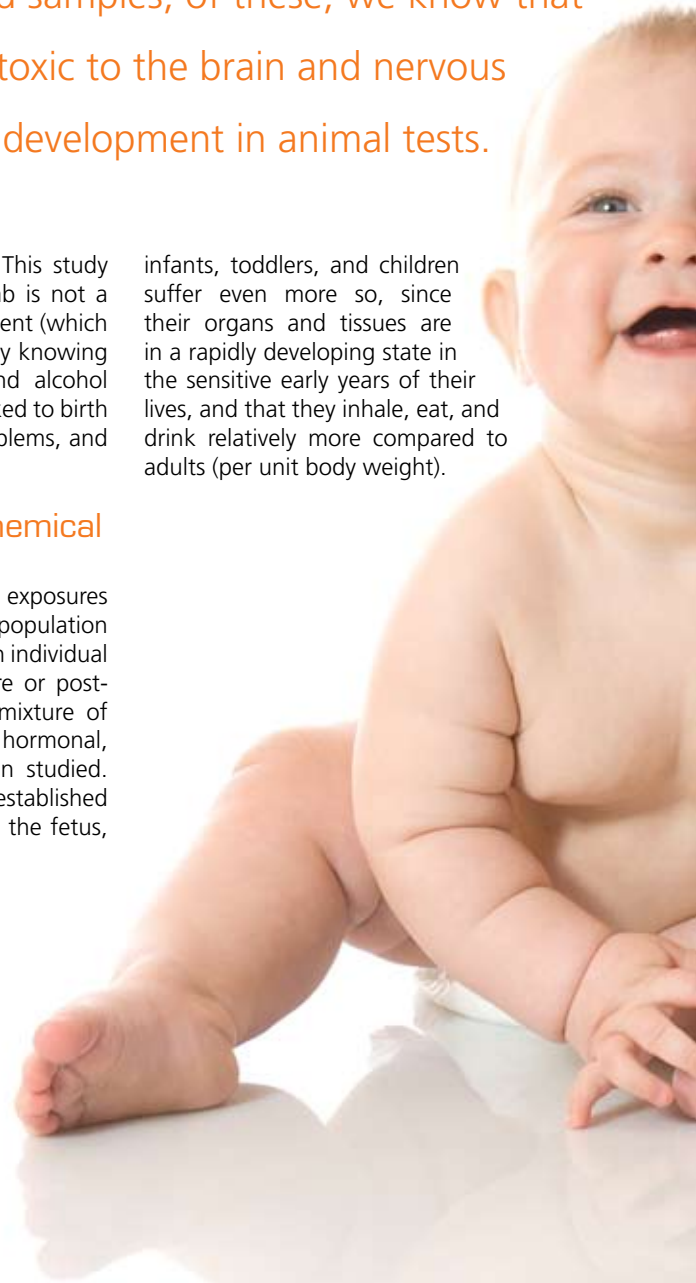
This ground-breaking research study (conducted by the Environmental Working Group (EWG)) was the first to show the sheer 'body burden' of chemicals that the developing fetus faces in the womb. Among the chemicals found were numerous pesticides, flame-retardants, stain and oil-repellent chemicals (as used by clothing manufacturers and in non-stick cooking pans), and wastes from burning coal and gasoline. These types of chemicals are known carcinogens, hormone-disruptors,

immunotoxins, and neurotoxins. This study highlights the fact that the womb is not a chemical-free haven for development (which it was once thought to be) already knowing that tobacco smoke residues and alcohol pass into the developing fetus (linked to birth defects, learning & breathing problems, and reductions in fertility).

## Lack of Research of Chemical Effects on the Young

The dangers of these chemical exposures are partially known in the adult population from existing studies conducted on individual chemicals, but the dangers of pre or post-natal exposure to this complex mixture of carcinogens, developmental toxins, hormonal, and neurotoxins have never been studied. Note that harm has already been established in adults, and it is very likely that the fetus,

infants, toddlers, and children suffer even more so, since their organs and tissues are in a rapidly developing state in the sensitive early years of their lives, and that they inhale, eat, and drink relatively more compared to adults (per unit body weight).



## Rising Illnesses in Children

An important question is, do these chemicals have a role to play in the increasing health problems that currently affect our young? It just so happens that North Americans are experiencing an epidemic of chronic and childhood diseases that are increasingly linked to chemical pollutants found in our bodies. These problems include increasing levels of childhood cancers (including leukemias, brain and bone cancers); significantly increasing levels of childhood asthma, allergies and respiratory problems; increased developmental and learning disorders (e.g. Autism, AD/HD), birth defects, early puberty; and also reductions in fertility.

## A Precautionary Approach

Although there is incomplete understanding of how environmental chemicals exactly contribute to the development of such illnesses, there is enough preliminary research to justify a more precautionary and proactive approach. Consider the extended amount of time and research and cost (including health costs) it took to conclusively prove the connection between tobacco smoke and lung cancer, before government-funded campaigns began to encourage reduced smoking. A more precautionary approach would reduce or eliminate exposures to risky chemicals.

Some positive trends from Health Canada are their recent commitment to evaluate some of the most toxic chemicals found in our domestic exposures. Of the 23,000 chemicals on the domestic substances list (DSL), about 200 have been identified for high

priority review in their effects on human health and on the environment (for updates and findings, check our government website [www.chemicalsubstances.gc.ca](http://www.chemicalsubstances.gc.ca)).

Bisphenol A is an example of a hormone-disrupting chemical that the Health Canada review process has identified as being of concern for potential effects on infants. Many studies have shown that it causes brain and reproductive system damage in crucial stages of development. As a result, Health Canada has now prohibited its use in products used for infants up to 18 months of age, particularly in hard plastics, and infant formula container linings.

## Our Fertility, Our Future

There are a few major reasons why it is becoming increasingly difficult to conceive a baby. One significant cause is that we are having babies at a later age. However, it is likely that chemicals found in our environment may be playing a role as well. Since we have some control over our chemical exposures, this is something we can positively influence to encourage better fertility outcomes.

Researchers are finding links between chemical exposures and fertility challenges. For instance, male sperm counts have decreased by a whopping 40% over the past number of decades, and some research shows that certain chemicals are to blame including pesticides, toxic metals, plastic softeners (e.g. phthalates) used in food packaging, medical tubing, cosmetics, and baby plastic products.

For women, chemical exposures to solvents, pesticides, PCBs, metals, chlorine disinfection by-products in drinking water and ionizing radiation have been associated with delayed pregnancy, reduced infant birth weight/length/head size, spontaneous abortion/miscarriage, stillbirth, and congenital birth defects.



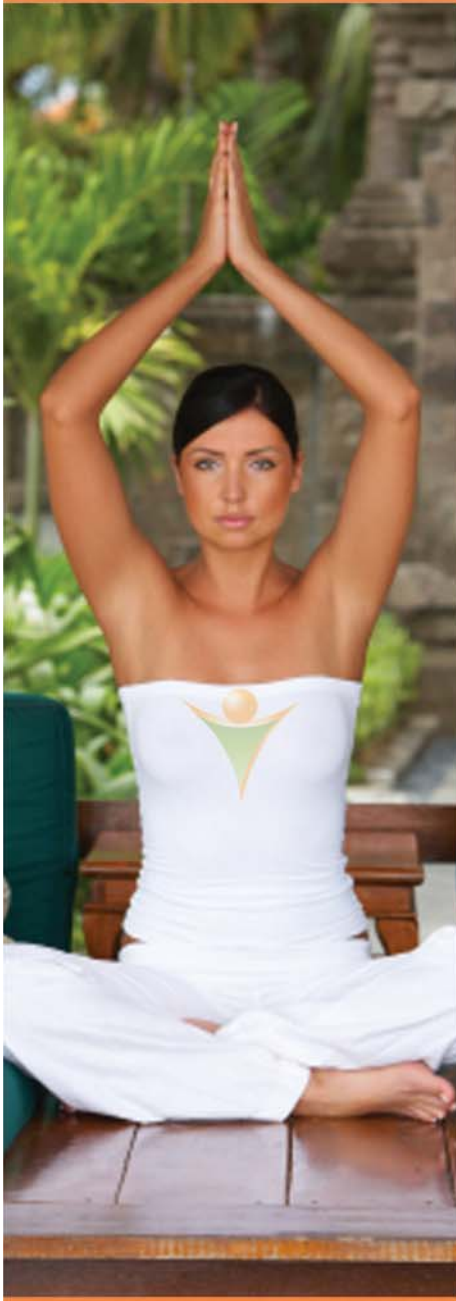
In fact, researchers from Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children concluded that women who were occupationally exposed to solvent chemicals during pregnancy had a 13-fold risk of fetuses developing major malformations compared to non-exposed pregnant women. As a result, one preventative measure for women (and even men) who are occupationally exposed to solvents is to give them protective reassignments in or out of the existing workplace.

Clearly, if we know that these environmental contaminant chemicals are having a detrimental impact on our fertility, are we not impacting our health and the health of future generations? The Canadian government has just begun biomonitoring tests (the Maternal-Infant Research on Environmental Chemicals (MIREC)) of chemicals found in fetal cord blood and meconium (the infants first stool), and the blood of pregnant women. In the meantime, there is a world of prevention that everyday Canadians can start today.

## Chemicals that Can Reduce Fertility

- Chemicals from smoke (including tobacco, marijuana)
- Alcohol
- Paint thinners
- Some pesticides
- Textile dyes
- Mercury, lead, cadmium
- Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs, as in car exhaust)
- Dry cleaning chemicals (PERC-perchloroethylene, TCE-tetrachloroethylene)
- Solvents (used by health care workers and textile industries; aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons, phenols, trichloroethylene, xylene, vinyl chloride, acetone)
- Medications (some anaesthetics and anti-inflammatories)
- Plasticizers such as phthalates

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### Everyday Choices That Can Reduce Chemical Exposures

- Eat organic foods – this will instantly reduce the level of pesticides in your blood – learn more at [www.cog.ca](http://www.cog.ca) (Canadian Organic Growers); alternatively, eat conventional grocery produce with low amounts of pesticide residues - check [www.foodnews.org](http://www.foodnews.org) for updates on the least and most pesticide-contaminated foods. For example, the foods highest in pesticide residues are peaches, apples, and bell peppers; the lowest contaminated foods are onions, avocados, frozen sweet corn, pineapples, mangoes, and asparagus (soon to be in season!).
- Minimize the use of plastics (especially PVC and polyurethane) - use cloth bags, store food and drinks in glass containers; choose wooden, metal, or fabric toys for your children; avoid plastic lined canned food (contains bisphenol A); use natural rubber/hemp/cotton yoga mats/shower curtains.
- Use a water filter - basic carbon filters are useful at removing chlorine, and reducing lead, mercury, copper, cadmium, some pesticides, and some volatile chemicals such as benzene.
- Avoid non-stick cooking equipment and stain-repellent clothing/products (PFCs) - use glass, ceramic, or stainless steel cooking utensils instead.
- Use plants in and outside your home and office - these are proven to reduce the levels of volatile chemicals in the air.
- Use more environmentally-friendly forms of dry cleaning and paint products - avoid the standard dry cleaning solvent used, perchloroethylene (PERC); also purchase paints that do not contain volatile chemicals (VOCs), known as low/no-VOC paint.
- Avoid seafood containing high amounts of mercury, such as tuna, Atlantic halibut, king mackerel, marlin, sea bass, shark, swordfish and orange roughy – Health Canada recommends breastfeeding mothers and even women of child-bearing age to eat no more than 150g of these fish per month (about two servings only). See more about this at Seafood Selector at [www.edf.org](http://www.edf.org)
- Avoid child and maternal consumption of nitrite-containing meats (hot dogs and cured meat/fish) - associated with leukemias and brain cancers in young children.
- Use healthier cosmetics and personal care products and cleaning agents - many cosmetics contain lead, phthalates (chemicals that soften plastics), parabens & DEA/TEA/MEA (hormone-disruptive chemicals), etc. For more information, and alternatives, a great Canadian resource is [www.lesstoxicguide.ca](http://www.lesstoxicguide.ca) which gives alternative product names and ways to make your own.
- Avoid products with brominated fire retardants (PBDEs) - opt for less flammable fabrics and materials, like leather, wool and cotton.
- Support alternative energy production - e.g. geothermal and wind energy instead of coal-fired power plants; for example, Bullfrog Power lets you buy more ecologically friendly electricity (in BC, Alberta, and Ontario).
- Reduce the use of your car - bicycle, walk, jog, take public transit, live closer to where you work - this will reduce airborne toxics like sulphur and nitrogen oxides and particulate matter that are associated with asthma, strokes and heart disease.



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## A Role for Naturopathic Pre-conception Preventative Cleansing/Detoxification

Our industrial society has made us chemically dependent to produce the many products we use everyday. Changing our lifestyle and product choices to reduce chemical exposures is an obvious place to start. In addition, since our governments and industries are slow to change, it is important to actually do something to help eliminate the chemicals that are already in our bodies.

I propose that Canadians perform regular proactive programs to cleanse their bodies of such toxics. In particular, I recommend newlyweds, or partners who are committing to live together or to have a baby, undertake a comprehensive cleanse - call it a 'couples cleanse', 'commitment cleanse', or an 'engagement cleanse'...

Most couples can't wait to get pregnant, but a naturopathic approach would suggest approaching conception with more consciousness. We need to prepare our bodies in many ways before we attempt conception. One very important way to prepare is to get the toxins out! This can be a simple process or one that is more comprehensive.

The details of a detoxification program are beyond the scope of this article, but there are a few important points. For instance, I encourage simple cleanses at every change of season, and more complex and comprehensive detox-regimes every year or two, and definitely before attempting to conceive a baby. A comprehensive detox ranges from a week to 3 months, and is best done with both partners in conjunction with a trained health care professional. Not only is there a release of toxins, but circulation and general health and vitality improves as well. It is also an intense bonding opportunity for the couple.

Naturopathic doctors (NDs) are ideally suited to recommend a good cleanse. Naturopathic doctors are primary health care professionals, and can recommend appropriate tests, and safe and effective methods of detoxification.

Various techniques are employed to help first support the body nutritionally, then to strengthen organ functions, and then to more actively promote the release of existing

## Case Study

Jennifer, in her twenties, was successfully treated for her endometriosis by her naturopathic doctor. She then asked how she could prepare for pregnancy. A blood test measuring 22 chlorinated pesticides was done before and after her detoxification program, and showed 11 pesticides were at elevated levels. Her program consisted of primarily organic fruits and vegetables, eating less dairy, fish and animal protein, and used a far-infrared sauna for 3 months. In that amount of time, her pesticide levels dropped by a whopping 86%, after which she successfully had her baby!



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chemicals from your body. Some basic tests are helpful to give an idea of where you stand – hair/blood/urine/stool analyses can tell you about toxic metal levels, or even levels of pesticides, flame retardants, and PCBs.

Generally speaking, it is important to have regular bowel movements (3 per day), and to support the liver with nutrients and herbs associated with promoting elimination. Drinking sufficient liquids is very important. One method of elimination that is very helpful is encouraging perspiration. An effective

technique that is part of a comprehensive plan would include regular sauna usage. Sauna therapy promotes perspiration and overall circulation, and has been shown to encourage the elimination of toxic chemicals including pesticides, solvents, toxic metals, and other classes of toxic chemicals.

I recommend that people seek out professional guidance on how to conduct a safe detoxification program. For instance, it is important that a good level of nutrition be maintained, and that your organs are

currently functioning competently, such as your thyroid, liver, kidney, and digestive organs. As the case study points out, we do have the ability to reduce the toxic burdens we all have in our bodies. By proactively preventing exposures, and proactively detoxifying our bodies, we can ensure a healthier future for our children and for the environment. ✓

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## Resources for More Information

- [www.environmentaldefence.ca](http://www.environmentaldefence.ca)  
A Canadian group promoting government action
- [www.pollutionprobe.org](http://www.pollutionprobe.org)  
Canadian organization promoting environmental research
- [www.cape.ca](http://www.cape.ca)  
Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment
- [www.ewg.org](http://www.ewg.org)  
The Environmental Working Group, an American environmental group
- "Ecoholics"  
By Adria Vasil - The most environmentally friendly products, information and services in Canada
- [www.safecosmetics.org](http://www.safecosmetics.org) & [www.cosmeticdatabase.com](http://www.cosmeticdatabase.com)  
Search your cosmetic ingredients here
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