

Reproductive Facts

Patient fact sheet developed by the
American Society for Reproductive Medicine



Will toxins in the environment affect my ability to have children?

What are toxic environmental agents?

These are harmful substances (chemicals, metals, pollutants) found in water, air, soil, foods, and consumer products. You may or may not know that you have been exposed to these substances. These toxins can build up and cause changes in your body. They can affect fertility by changing a woman's hormones and menstrual cycle, by affecting sperm quality, or by causing changes in the development of a growing fetus. Some may pass from a pregnant woman to her fetus and can lead to genetic mutations and birth defects.

Who is most vulnerable to exposure?

Everyone has some exposure to toxic substances. However, certain people are at a higher risk of exposure: people living in areas with higher pollution, those working outdoors or with pesticides, those working with chemicals, radiation, or heavy metals in the workplace, and those living in poor areas. It is difficult to predict or measure levels of exposure. However, avoiding exposure in the workplace may be possible by using protective clothing and equipment.

What can I do to minimize the effects of exposure?

Everyone cannot avoid exposure entirely. Exposure happens every day in different amounts, multiple situations, and for many years. To reduce your likelihood of exposure:

- Choose foods with less pesticide exposure, such as organic fruits, vegetables, fish, and meat products.
- Use gloves, glasses, and protective clothing when working with chemicals.
- Avoid chemicals known to be toxic (although this does not change past exposure).
- Reduce the amount of processed food and fast food you eat.
- Eat lower amounts of deep-sea fish (swordfish, shark, king mackerel, and tilefish) to minimize mercury exposure.
- Check for lead-based paint in your house.

How concerned should I be about exposure to toxins?

You should be aware that what you eat, where you live, and your workplace environment may affect your exposure to toxic environmental agents. You should also be aware that you cannot prevent all exposure, as some types of exposure are outside your control. To limit your exposure, start by taking an inventory of what you eat, cleaning products you use, and chemicals around you. Read label warnings, seek advice on possible effects, and think about changes you can make to reduce your exposure.

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