Studies of Health Impacts Associated with Cleaning Products

The following is an annotated literature review in chronological order, summarizing key findings of numerous scientific studies documenting the health effects associated with various cleaning products.

*Toxicology and Applied Pharmacology 1984*—Musk Ambrette, a commonly used fragrance ingredient, has been found to cause serious brain damage in laboratory animals.


*Clinical and Experimental Allergy 1997*—Asthma prevalence in schools has been associated with higher relative air humidity, higher concentrations of volatile organic compounds, and mold or bacteria.


*New Scientist 1999*—Frequent use of air fresheners and aerosol sprays in the home contributed to 25 percent more headaches and 19 percent more incidence of depression in mothers and 30 percent more ear infections and 22 percent greater incidence of diarrhea in infants less than six months of age.


*Eighth International Conference on Indoor Air Quality and Climate 1999*—Floor cleaning products were found to be a cause of occupational asthma.


*European Respiratory Journal 2000*—Acute short-term exposure to common cleaning chemicals was found to cause a severe asthmatic attack and adult respiratory distress syndrome in an asthmatic subject.


*Scandinavian Journal of Workers Environmental Health*—Asthma prevalence in cleaners of private homes was 1.7 times higher than that of a control group. This incidence was related to kitchen cleaning and furniture polishing.

American Journal of Industrial Medicine 2001—Janitors and cleaners (625/million) and firefighters (300/million) in California had the highest reported rates of work-related asthma. Half of all work-related asthma cases were associated with agents not known to be allergens.


European Respiratory Journal 2002—A 22-year comparative study of cleaning women and administrative workers found that cleaners had an increased risk of developing persistent adult-onset asthma.


Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine 2003—A study of confirmed cases of work-related asthma in four states found that 12 percent were associated with exposure to cleaning chemicals. Of these, 80 percent were new onset cases and 20 percent were work-aggravated cases.


Thorax 2003—Asthma was found to be more prevalent in women previously or currently employed as domestic cleaners as compared to women who had never worked in the cleaning industry. Domestic cleaning work may have a serious public health impact that affects professional cleaners and people cleaning their own homes.


Thorax 2004—Children living in homes with higher levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) showed a marked increase in their risk of asthma. VOCs are emitted by cleaning products, air fresheners, and building products.


Environmental Health Perspectives 2004 – Children exposed to phthalates had a higher incidence of being diagnosed with asthma, rhinitis, or eczema. Phthalates were measured in house dust from bedrooms and a dose-response relationship was confirmed. Phthalates are found in PVC (polyvinyl chloride) or VCT (vinyl composite tile) flooring, plastics, adhesives and many other products. Dust from bedrooms with PVC or VCT flooring was more likely to have higher concentrations of phthalates.

CG Bornehag et al. “The Association Between Asthma and Allergic Symptoms in Children and Phthalates in House Dust: A Nested Case-Control Study,” Environmental Health Perspectives
The Plain Facts

**Thorax 2005**—Prenatal exposure to the use of disinfectants, bleach, carpet cleaner, window cleaner, air fresheners, paints, dry cleaning fluid, aerosols, and pesticides increased the risk that the young child would have persistent wheezing. Scientists determined that the more frequently the chemicals were used, the greater the risk of persistent wheezing, which can be a precursor to asthma.


**Environmental Health Perspectives 2005**—85 mothers and sons were tested for phthalates in their urine. The mothers with the highest levels of phthalates in their urine late in their pregnancies produced babies with genital abnormalities. This same effect has been seen in rats, but this is the first evidence that phthalates are causing a similar effect in humans. In rats, “phthalate syndrome” causes a decrease in testosterone levels, lower sperm counts, infertility, and testicular abnormalities in the mature animal.


**15th Annual Congress of the European Respiratory Society 2005**—The authors presented the results of a study that linked household sprays and new onset asthma. 4,200 subjects who cleaned their own homes took part in the study, with 3,500 participants initially being asthma free. After nine years, the data showed that the incidence of asthma was greater in participants who used sprays more frequently. “Between 11 percent and 18 percent of new asthma cases can be attributed to frequent use of household aerosols.” The most hazardous of the sprays used were room, furniture, and window sprays. Using ammonia, bleach, or dye solvents was also found to put people at risk for developing asthma.


**Occupational and Environmental Medicine 2005**—Asthma symptoms in domestic cleaning women are associated with exposure to bleach and possibly other irritant agents. The public health impact of using cleaning products that contain irritants could be widespread because the use of these products is common in the workplace and at home.


**Indoor Air Chemistry: Cleaning Agents, Ozone and Toxic Air Contaminants 2006**—The “research focused on two common classes of ingredients in cleaning products and air fresheners: ethylene-based glycol ethers, which are classified as toxic air contaminants, and terpenes, which react rapidly with ozone.” The researchers measured exposures from several different scenarios and found:

- Users of products with high levels of ethylene-based glycol ethers or terpenes should make sure the areas being cleaned are properly ventilated during and after cleaning.
- Some products should be used in a dilution rather than full strength.
- Cleaning supplies should be promptly removed from occupied spaces.
• Using ozone generators or ionizing air cleaners should be avoided, especially where cleaning products that contain terpenes or air fresheners are used.


**American Journal of Industrial Medicine 2007** – 2,995 cases of work related asthma from four states were examined. Teachers or teacher’s aids made up 54% of the cases.

“Conclusions - Asthma within the educational services industry is an occupational health problem. The health of school employees should also be considered when initiatives addressing asthma among schoolchildren are instituted. The identification, elimination, and/or control of respiratory hazards are important factors for the protection of staff and students alike.”

Jacek M. Mazurek, MD, MS, Margaret Filios, SM, RN, Ruth Willis, MS, Kenneth D. Rosenman, MD, Mary Jo Reilly, MS, Katharine McGreevy, PhD, Donald P. Schill, MS, CIH, David Valiante, MS, CIH, Elise Pechter, MPH, CIH, Letitia Davis, ScD, Jennifer Flattery, MPH, and Robert Harrison, MD, MPH, “Work-Related Asthma in the Educational Services Industry: California, Massachusetts, Michigan, and New Jersey”, 1993–2000

**American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine 2007** – “The use of cleaning sprays at least weekly was associated with the incidence of asthma symptoms or medication and wheeze. The incidence of physician-diagnosed asthma was higher among those using sprays at least 4 days per week. Risks were predominantly found for the commonly used glass-cleaning, furniture, and air-refreshing sprays.” A similar correlation was not found with products not applied in spray form.


**European Respiratory Journal** – “Increased use of domestic chemical based products was associated with persistent wheezing during early childhood. These findings suggest that frequent use of chemical based products in the prenatal period is associated with persistent wheezing in young children.”

**Occupational Medicine** – Twelve focus group session participants were asked about their job tasks, type of products they use to clean, bodily symptoms, job training and work environment. Three general themes emerged regarding cleaning professionals' work experiences: (i) job training, (ii) chemical exposure and use and (iii) competence. “Domestic cleaners demonstrated significant skills deficit across each of these three themes as compared to industrial cleaners. Domestic cleaners reported more frequent exposure to respiratory irritants and sensitizers and also reported adverse respiratory symptoms as compared to industrial cleaners. CONCLUSIONS: The results from this qualitative study are consistent with earlier findings from quantitative studies placing domestic cleaners at risk of exposure to chemicals that are respiratory irritants and/or sensitizers.”


**Microbiology** – Antibiotic resistant bacteria such as MRSA and pseudomonas aeruginosa are becoming more prevalent. When a disinfectant containing benzalkonium chloride was applied to lab cultures of pseudomonas aeruginosa, the microbe adapted to survive not only the disinfectant but also a common antibiotic.

"In principle this means that residue from incorrectly diluted disinfectants left on hospital surfaces could promote the growth of antibiotic-resistant bacteria," said lead researcher Gerard Fleming of the National University of Ireland in Galway. "What is more worrying is that bacteria seem to be able to adapt to resist antibiotics without even being exposed to them."


**Occupational and Environmental Medicine** – “In a survey of mothers of children with birth defects, those who were janitors or scientists were more likely to have children with certain conditions, Michele Herdt-Losavio, PhD, of the New York State Department of Health, and colleagues reported online in Occupational & Environmental Medicine.

They found that women working as janitors had a significantly increased risk of giving birth to a child with seven specific defects: ear, eye, musculoskeletal, gastrointestinal, and oral clefts, among others, Herdt-Losavio said.

These included amniotic bands, anotia/microtia, anorectal atresia, anophthalmia/microphthalmia, glaucoma, and bladder exstrophy. Janitorial occupations had previously been associated with neural tube defects, spina bifida, and oral clefts, the researchers said.”

Environmental Working Group - Cleaning supplies used in 13 large California school districts release an airborne brew of 457 chemicals, including a number that have been linked to asthma or cancer by state and federal health authorities. Tests of 21 cleaners from these schools conducted for the Environmental Working Group found that when used as directed, the products released 6 chemicals known to cause asthma, 11 contaminants that are known, probable, or possible cancer-causing substances in humans, and hundreds of other compounds for which there is little or no hazard information.

Rebecca Sutton. Greener School Cleaning Supplies = Fresh Air + Healthier Kids
New Research Links School Air Quality to School Cleaning Supplies. Environmental Working Group, November 2009

Microbiology - Using disinfectants could help superbug bacteria become resistant not only to the disinfectant itself but to antibiotics even if they have not been exposed to them, according to a new study from Ireland. Benzalkonium chloride was used in the research.


Environmental Health Perspectives – Pre-natal exposure to phthalates found in pesticides, scented products and personal care products is associated with a greater risk the child will develop disruptive behavior disorders. Children whose mothers had higher levels of a certain type of phthalates in their blood during the third trimester of pregnancy had a higher risk of developing conduct, aggression and attention deficits in later childhood. Some of the effects of these chemicals appeared to be greater in boys than girls – especially aggression, attention problems and hyperactivity.


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