

ICEA Position Paper

Education of Pregnant Families on Harmful Environmental Substances

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Position

The International Childbirth Education Association recognizes the need to provide evidence-based education and information to expectant and new parents on strategies to minimize the effects of harmful environmental chemicals and toxins to the developing fetus, the pregnant woman and the family.

Background

There is an increasing awareness of the effects of many environmental exposures and their negative effects on the pregnant woman and her fetus. Research is focusing on where these chemicals occur, their effect on the health of the environment and their effect on human health including reproductive concerns.

The World Health Organization issued the following statement:

Environmental hazards are responsible for about a quarter of the total burden of disease worldwide. As many as 13 million deaths can be prevented every year by making our environment healthier.

In 2013, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Society for Reproductive Medicine released a joint statement that said:

“toxic chemicals in our environment harm our ability to reproduce, negatively affect pregnancies and are associated with numerous long-term health problems.”

They issued a joint recommendation for all pregnant women to receive information on avoiding toxic chemicals.

Because of these concerns, it is becoming imperative that perinatal educators work with prenatal healthcare providers to make this information readily available to pregnant women and their families.

What are the health concerns related to exposures?

Much research has focused on the consequences of exposures to these harmful chemicals with particular focus on pregnancy. The effects range from chromosomal damage, reproductive anomalies, central nervous system disorders, endocrine dysfunctions and prematurity.

What are the harmful chemicals of concern?

These chemicals can be categorized into the following categories:

- 📄 personal care products
- 📄 food additives
- 📄 household cleaning products
- 📄 lawn care chemicals
- 📄 plastics

Some specific chemicals of concern in each category:

1. **Personal care products** – parabens, phthalates, fragrances, dyes, anti-bacterial
2. **Food additives** – hormones, preservatives, dyes, genetically modified foods
3. **Household cleaning products** – chlorine, formaldehyde, benzenes, solvents
4. **Lawn care chemicals** – herbicides and pesticides; exposures through lawn treatments and ingested through foods
5. **Plastics** – especially leaching of plasticizers from food containers into food

The Role of the Childbirth Educator and Doula in Environmental Education

Incorporating environmental education into classes and prenatal education topics:

- 📄 **Fetal growth and development** – add fetal concerns related to maternal use of personal care products, air and water pollution, lawn care and agrichemicals, and food additives

- 📄 **Nutrition** – add concerns related to maternal, fetal and child health exposures with education on the importance of cleaner food sources (organic and non-GMO foods)

www.organic-center.org
www.cleanableproject.org

And alternatives to plastic food containers for preparation, serving and storage. Glass containers or plant-based plastic alternatives.

- 📄 **Newborn care** – add information about concerns related to harmful care product additives such as fragrances, phthalates, parabens, dyes and other harmful or toxic additives. Prenatal education is the optimal time to begin education on family care products including shampoos, lotions, toothpaste, soaps, and deodorant. Encourage using fewer products with fewer ingredients.

www.EWG.org/cleaningguides

Offering safe and healthier alternatives:

1. **Personal care products** – glycerin and castile soaps, plant oils and butters for skin care
2. **Food additives** – choose non-GMO and/or organic whenever possible, avoid hormone containing meats and dairy, avoid dyes, artificial preservatives, artificial sugar substitutes
3. **Household cleaning products** – use basics including vinegar, baking soda or lemon juice
4. **Lawn care products** – composting, non-chemical herbicides and pesticides, natural fertilizers
5. **Plastics** – switch to food containers made from glass, stainless steel or bamboo, use plant-based plastics whenever possible

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