

From The Women's Health Contribution Program

Supported by the Bureau of Women's Health and Gender Analysis, Health Canada

W O M E N ' S H E A L T H P O L I C Y B R I E F

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Towards Healthy Environments for Children

Frequently Asked Questions about Breastfeeding in a Contaminated Environment

At Issue

Chemical contaminants are causing harm to our children, but it's not just mothers who should be worried. Everyone should be.

In the past several years, there have been an increasing number of reports in the press about environmental contaminants in breast milk. It is indeed disturbing that Canadian women's breastmilk has levels of toxic flame retardants (known as polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs) 5 to 10 times higher than those in countries like Japan, Sweden and Germany, as reported by Health Canada research scientist Jake Ryan at a 2004 conference in Toronto. The accumulation of chemical residues in breastmilk, however, is not a reason for mothers to stop breastfeeding.

It is important for all Canadians to be aware that there are few health risks from the average levels of chemical residues in breastmilk. Most effects on infants from chemical residues are associated with exposure before conception from damage done to father's semen, or when the baby is in the womb, rather than from breastmilk. Studies have shown that breastfeeding, even in a contaminated environment, has a positive impact on the development of children as compared to children fed commercial baby milks.

Our Analysis

Breastmilk is safer and healthier for children than manufactured infant formulas.

Media campaigns that insensitively headline stories about contaminated breastmilk in order to draw attention to environmental pollution may discourage breastfeeding. Breastfeeding provides a vast array of physical and psychological benefits to mothers and babies not available to infants fed on commercial products. Breastfeeding is, in fact, safer than infant formula and provides babies with much needed additional immunity.

Recalls of infant formula are regularly made because of industrial and bacterial contamination, including cases where infants died or became seriously ill from infant formula contaminated by *Enterobacter sakazakii*. In addition, while such common contaminants as nitrates in ground water may be tolerated by a breastfeeding mother, they can be fatal if the water is given directly to the baby. The use of growth hormones in dairy cattle and genetically engineered ingredients (such as soy) pose new and as yet unknown risks. Meanwhile, the production and distribution of infant formula further adds to environmental contamination.

It is critical that chemical residues be reduced in the environment to reduce the health risks they pose to us all. The onus must be placed on the sources of contamination—the chemical industries responsible and the governments who must enforce protective laws and regulations.

Advancing the health of women

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Our Recommendations

Governments can benefit from the work of women's health organizations, breastfeeding advocacy groups, health activists, and environmental groups to minimize and eliminate everyone's exposure to harmful contaminants.

- As with public health problems such as epidemics and infectious diseases, it is government's responsibility to protect the health of families and their children, and not the responsibility of the individual alone.
- Governments should be sensitive to the importance of breastfeeding and act in the best interest of Canadian children. Some countries have taken positive steps. In Europe, strong governmental programs to eliminate persistent organic pollutants like DDT, dieldrin, PCBs and dioxin have resulted in dramatic decreases of these residues in breastmilk.
- In Canada, several local governments have banned the use of pesticides for cosmetic use on lawns. Regulatory frameworks by all levels of governments and international organizations are important to minimize and eliminate exposure to harmful contaminants.
- International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, like Convention No: 184 on Health and Safety in Agriculture have been particularly helpful. More needs to be done. The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) entered into force 17th May 2004, which calls for national bans on incineration. Canada was a leader in bringing about the treaty, but will need sustained support.

This fact sheet is based on "Frequently asked questions about breastfeeding in contaminated environments," available online at:

www.yorku.ca/nnewh. You can also request a hard copy of this report and other topics on women's health in *Head, Heart and Hand: Partnerships for Women's Health in Canadian Environments, Volume I and II* from the National Network on Environments and Women's Health (416) 736-2100, ext. 20713.

For additional information about breastfeeding and environmental health, please visit:

International Baby Food Action Network www.ibfan.org

World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action www.waba.org.my

Chemical Reaction www.chemicalreaction.org

Baby Milk Action www.babymilkaction.org

La Leche League International www.lalecheleague.org

International POPs Elimination Network www.ipen.org

International Lactation Consultant Association www.ilca.org

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