



What We Can Do

COMMUNITY EFFORTS TO
PROTECT OUR HEALTH



what we can do

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**There is no social change fairy.
There is only change made by the
hands of individuals.**

—WINONA LADUKE

When women get together, powerful things can happen. Which is a good thing, because we need some powerful changes to ensure that we can all live in a healthy environment.

Women have long been leaders in pressing government to make health protection a priority. They organized against urban pollution and helped establish local health boards across the country in the 1800s, and they played a critical role in developing policies that led to establishing the Food and Drug Administration in 1906.

But even in the 21st century, we have lots of work to do. The government has failed to protect us from harmful chemicals and contaminants. It is time for women to lead our country in a new direction.

While it's important to make healthy choices at the grocery store, we can't shop our way to a healthy environment. Broader changes are needed. Elected officials need to hear from us that we want public-health laws and regulations that protect us and our families. We need to get active in our communities—making sure that our kids' schools are healthy places, that everyone has access to health care and that nobody lives in a contaminated neighborhood. We need a conversation in each and every living room across the country that helps us to think through the ways to make these changes possible.

This booklet provides background information on some of the challenges and opportunities to shift policies at the state and national levels. It also provides ideas about how to get active in the growing movement for a healthy environment. If you think it's time for a better life, grab a few friends and roll up your sleeves. It's time to get to work.

For the other booklets in this series, *What We Know: New Science Linking Our Health and the Environment* and *What You Can Do: Everyday Actions to Protect Your Health*, see www.womenshealthandenvironment.org/toolkit.



National: Better Laws Are Needed and Possible

The Problem

We all want to believe that the government is doing a good job protecting our health. Unfortunately, that just isn't true. By the federal government's own assessments, many of the laws on industrial chemical and pesticide use, air and water pollution, hazardous waste disposal and workplace safety are not succeeding. And with more than 700 new chemicals being introduced every year, a new approach to dealing with environmental contaminants is needed.

What's wrong with current policies on contaminants?

Thousands of synthetic chemicals have never been tested for safety.

Of the 62,000 chemicals already on the market when the Toxic Substance Control Act (TSCA) went into effect in 1976, the government has required testing for fewer than 200. There currently are more than 80,000 chemicals registered for use and almost no health data on them is publicly available.

The laws have not kept up with the science.

For many years, it was assumed that environmental contaminants were harmful only at high levels of exposure. Recently, however, researchers have discovered that low-level exposures may have very different, but potentially harmful, effects on human health. Also, laws set exposure standards as if people were exposed to one chemical at a time, while in reality we are exposed to multiple contaminants in the air we breathe, the water we drink and the products we use. Policies still reflect the old way of thinking about health risks.

There is no clear definition of "safe" exposure to environmental contaminants.

According to TSCA, chemicals used in manufacturing need to pose an "unreasonable risk" before the Environmental Protection Agency can restrict their use, but the law does not define what type of risk is unreasonable. Cosmetics and other personal care products, including baby shampoos, lotions and powders, have no safety standards.

The world isn't only made of adult men.

Even when there is a safety standard, legally acceptable exposure to environmental contaminants is often based on how adult men are affected. But women's bodies are different—we have different organs, different hormones and the potential to bear children. Current standards also do not account for vulnerable populations, such as children, whose growth and development can be seriously affected by exposure to environmental contaminants that would have much less impact on adult men.

People of color carry the heaviest burden.

Racially and ethnically diverse communities are more likely to live near hazardous waste sites or industrial sites, and they are often exposed to pollution from multiple sources in their community. Existing laws do little to successfully reduce this unfair impact. These health risks are often made worse because people living in polluted communities generally have less access to health care.

Health and environmental laws are not well enforced.

Existing laws would not successfully protect our health even if they were fully enforced, yet most laws are barely enforced because of lack of funding or political will. For example, only five chemicals or chemical categories have been banned from use in the United States despite significant scientific evidence that many others may be putting our health at risk.

To learn what laws on health and the environment exist, see the Environmental Protection Agency's website: www.epa.gov/epahome/laws.htm.

To learn more about the government's assessment of the weakness of many of these laws, see U.S. Government Accountability Office: www.gao.gov.





The Solution

In 2004, community and environmental health leaders from across the country gathered in Louisville, Kentucky, and developed the Louisville Charter, which calls for these new policy directions:

Require Safer Substitutes and Solutions

Seek to eliminate the use and emissions of hazardous chemicals by altering production processes, substituting safer chemicals, redesigning products and systems, rewarding innovation and re-examining product function. Safer substitution includes an obligation on the part of the public and private sectors to invest in research and development of sustainable chemicals, products, materials and processes.

Phase Out Persistent, Bioaccumulative, or Highly Toxic Chemicals

Prioritize for elimination of chemicals that are slow to degrade, accumulate in our bodies or living organisms or are highly hazardous to humans or the environment. Ensure that chemicals eliminated in the United States are not exported to other countries.

Give the Public and Workers the Full Right-to-Know and Participate

Provide meaningful involvement for the public and workers in decisions on chemicals. Disclose chemicals and materials, list quantities of chemicals produced, used, released and exported and provide public/worker access to chemical hazard, use and exposure information.

Act on Early Warnings

Act with foresight. Prevent harm from new or existing chemicals when credible evidence of harm exists, even when some uncertainty remains regarding the exact nature and magnitude of the harm.

Require Comprehensive Safety Data for All Chemicals

For a chemical to remain on or be placed on the market, manufacturers must provide publicly available safety information about that chemical. The information must be sufficient to permit a reasonable evaluation of the safety of the chemical for human health and the environment, including hazard, use and exposure information. This is the principle of “No Data, No Market.”

Take Immediate Action to Protect Communities and Workers

When communities and workers are exposed to levels of chemicals that pose a health hazard, immediate action is necessary to eliminate these exposures. We must ensure that no population is disproportionately burdened by chemicals.

For more information, see www.louisvillecharter.org.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

TALK WITH YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Every city, town and rural area across this country is represented by members of the U.S. House and Senate. Your voices as women, mothers, caregivers and local leaders can offer powerful and influential perspectives to them. Take advantage of your voice and call upon your elected officials when you have concerns and ideas or want to tell them they are doing a good job. You can meet with their staff if you are in Washington DC, or even better, you can often meet them in person when they are home in their district or you can attend their town hall meetings. Remember that these Members are elected to represent you and are looking for compelling issues to champion in the U.S. Congress.

CHANGING POLICIES

There are lots of organizations working to strengthen national laws protecting women’s health and a healthy environment. Join their email lists or get their newsletters to find out what you can do. *Below is just a partial list of great organizations:*

- **Environmental Working Group:** www.ewg.org
- **Healthy Schools Network:** www.healthyschools.org
- **Natural Resources Defense Council:** www.nrdc.org

CHANGING CORPORATE PRACTICES

Often government change comes after grassroots movements have shown the way by working for state policy reforms and/or organizing to hold corporations accountable for their practices. The next section of this booklet highlights important state policy changes. *There are also many national corporate campaigns to get involved with, such as these:*

- **Campaign for Safe Cosmetics** encourages companies to use safe ingredients in their products: www.safecosmetics.org.
- **Computer Take Back Campaign** promotes ways to recycle e-waste and encourages the computer industry to design less toxic and easier to recycle products: www.computertakeback.com.
- **Health Care Without Harm** works to reduce pollution in the health care industry: www.hcwh.org.
- **PVC: The Poison Plastic Campaign** works to eliminate the use of PVC: www.pvcfree.org.

States: Making Change

With big gaps in the federal government's ability to protect people from environmental contaminants, people are getting organized to change state policies and programs across the country. Below are highlights of some of the recent victories on state environmental health legislation.

For a more complete listing of state laws related to health and the environment, go to [The National Conference of State Legislatures \(www.ncsl.org/programs/environ/envhealth/cehdb.htm\)](http://The National Conference of State Legislatures (www.ncsl.org/programs/environ/envhealth/cehdb.htm)).

● Mercury

THE PROBLEM

Mercury can impact brain development, and it is especially harmful to a developing fetus or young child. Exposure to mercury is associated with reduced IQ, impaired memory and speech and learning disabilities in children.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Many states have taken steps to reduce mercury exposure by regulating emissions at coal-burning power plants, banning sales of products containing mercury (such as thermometers or blood pressure measuring devices) or requiring recycling or controlled disposal of products that contain mercury (such as electronics or switches in cars). All but the following states have mercury policies: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Nevada, New Mexico, South Dakota and West Virginia.

To learn more, see the Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/mercury/laws.htm.

● Pesticide Use in Schools

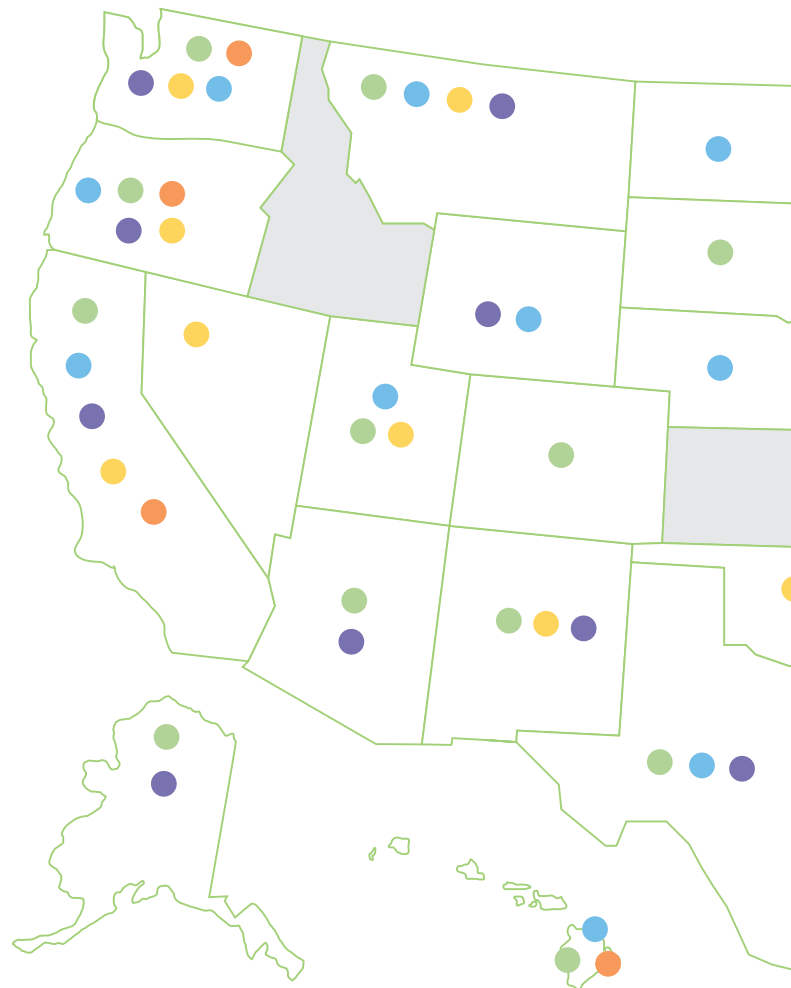
THE PROBLEM

Many schools across the country use harmful pesticides inside and outside where children can be exposed to them. Pesticides may increase risk for a wide range of health concerns, such as cancer or learning disabilities.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Some states are taking precautionary measures to reduce or eliminate children's exposure to pesticides at school, either by banning some of the more dangerous pesticides or requiring sign posting or parental notification if any of the school premises have been sprayed. Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Texas, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming have all passed related laws.

To learn more, see [Beyond Pesticides \(www.beyondpesticides.org/schools/schoolpolicies/index.htm\)](http://Beyond Pesticides (www.beyondpesticides.org/schools/schoolpolicies/index.htm)).



● Environmental Justice

THE PROBLEM

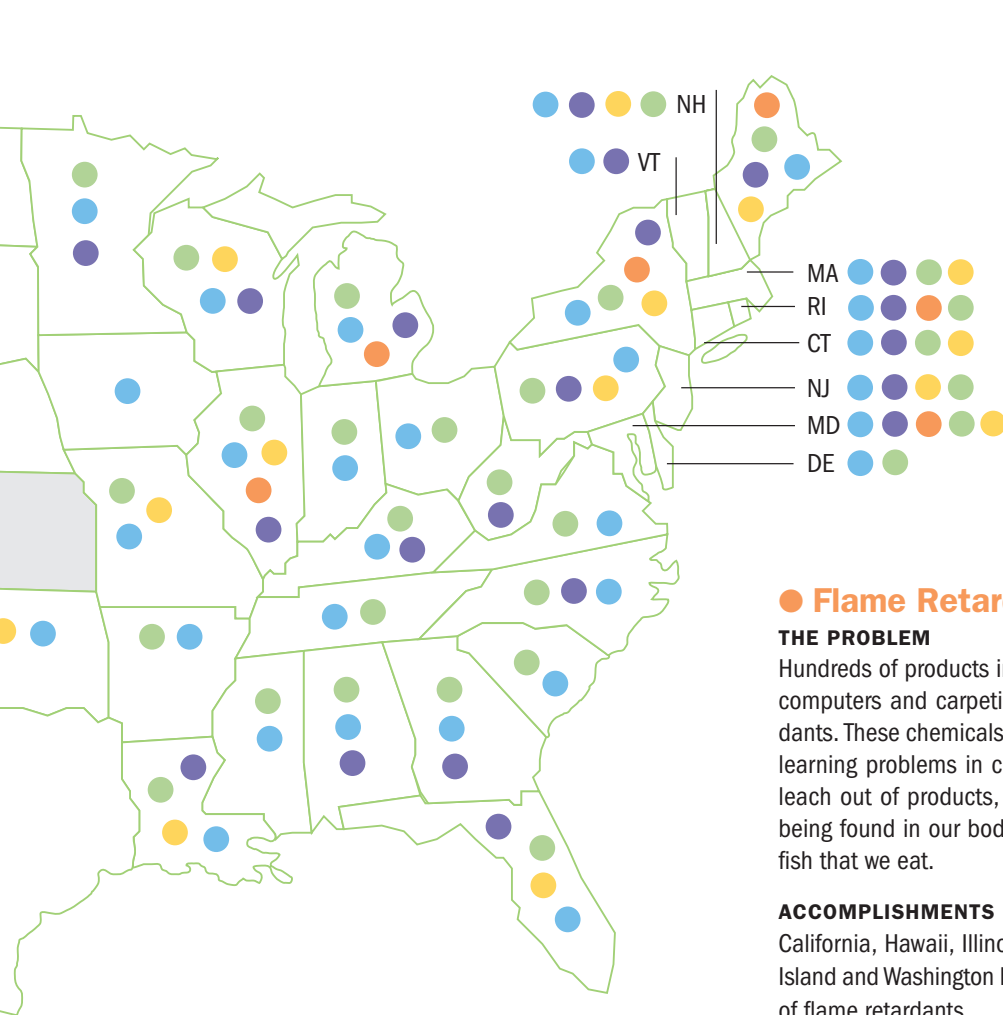
Low-income people and people of color tend to bear the heaviest burden from exposure to environmental contaminants because they often live near hazardous waste sites or polluting industries.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Many states have laws or initiatives promoting environmental justice (which is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies). These initiatives include guidelines for better public participation in decision making, staff trainings in environmental justice and other programs.

All states have established some sort of environmental justice initiative except Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Vermont and Wyoming.

To learn more, see [Environmental Justice For All: A Fifty-State Survey of Legislation, Policies and Initiatives \(www.abanet.org/irr/committees/environmental/statestudy.pdf\)](http://Environmental Justice For All: A Fifty-State Survey of Legislation, Policies and Initiatives (www.abanet.org/irr/committees/environmental/statestudy.pdf)).



- Mercury
- Pesticides in schools
- Flame Retardants
- Health Tracking
- Environmental Justice
- States with none of the above initiatives

● Flame Retardants

THE PROBLEM

Hundreds of products in our daily lives such as televisions, mattresses, furniture, computers and carpeting contain chemicals known as brominated flame retardants. These chemicals are associated with increased risk for developmental and learning problems in children, immune suppression and cancer. The chemicals leach out of products, are rapidly building up in our environment and are now being found in our bodies, our breast milk, the cord blood of newborns and the fish that we eat.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island and Washington have passed laws that restrict or ban the use of some kinds of flame retardants.

● Health Tracking

THE PROBLEM

Currently, there is no established national system to track people’s exposure to environmental contaminants and related health effects. If this information were collected, governments could plan actions to prevent environment-related diseases. Without this data, it is difficult to get an accurate sense of how many people are affected by health conditions associated with environmental exposures and how to prioritize policy changes.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The following states received grants from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to plan or establish health tracking systems: California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin.

To learn more see the CDC’s website: www.cdc.gov/nceh/tracking.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

People in states across the country are organizing for safer cosmetics, safer baby products, bans on mercury and flame retardants and other important laws. Get involved with organizations leading these efforts. Some examples include:

- **In California—Breast Cancer Fund:**
www.breastcancerfund.org
- **In Maine—The Alliance for a Healthy Maine:**
www.preventharm.org/camp.part.shtml
- **In Massachusetts—The Alliance for a Healthy Tomorrow:**
www.healthytomorrow.org
- **In Minnesota—The Healthy Legacy Coalition:**
www.healthylegacy.org
- **In Montana—Women’s Voices for the Earth:**
www.womenandenvironment.org
- **In Oregon—Rachel’s Friends Breast Cancer Coalition**
www.rachelsfriends.org
- **In Washington—Toxic Free Legacy Coalition:**
www.toxicfreelegacy.org



In Your Community: Start Where You Are

Sometimes the simplest way to start something big is to start right where you are—in your community. Below are ideas of how to get involved in spreading the word and make tangible changes that protect everybody's health.

Start a book or movie club about women's health and the environment

Book clubs are a great way to learn more and spread the word. If you already belong to a book club, suggest one of the books listed here for your next read. Or you can start a book club—either beginning with people you know or inviting new people through community bulletin boards, local newspapers or announcements at community events.

There are no rigid rules for running a book club. Some groups meet once a month to discuss an entire book, others meet every week or two to discuss a chapter.

- **A Civil Action by Jonathan Harr.** The story of Woburn, Massachusetts, the high incidence of childhood cancer associated with industrial pollution and the lawsuit against the responsible company.
- **Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor by Steve Lerner.** This story chronicles how the people of Diamond, an African-American subdivision sandwiched between a Shell chemical plant and a Motiva oil refinery in Norco, Louisiana, lobbied Shell to pay for their relocation after decades of exposure to toxic emissions.
- **Having Faith by Sandra Steingraber.** The author's story of pregnancy and environmental contaminants.
- **Living Downstream by Sandra Steingraber.** The author's story of having cancer and environmental contaminants linked to cancer.
- **Our Stolen Future by Theo Colborn, Dianne Dumanoski and John Peterson Myers.** An important book about endocrine disruptors—chemicals that harm people's hormone systems and can result in a range of serious health concerns.
- **Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place by Terry Tempest Williams.** The author's story of dealing with her mother's experience with breast cancer after nuclear testing by the U.S. government.
- **Silent Spring by Rachel Carson.** The seminal book on the role of pesticides in harming the health of animals and the environment. Many consider it an important contribution that helped inspire the start of the U.S. environmental movement.

**Nothing will work
unless you do**

—MAYA ANGELOU

- **When Smoke Ran Like Water by Devra Davis.** An account of some of the most toxic smog events, including the Donora Fog (1948) that blanketed a town in Pennsylvania for a week, leaving many people sick and some dead.

If an ongoing book club is more than your schedule can handle, you can try a movie night. Your group can watch the movie together, and be sure to allow time to talk when it is over.

- **A Civil Action:** The story of Woburn, Massachusetts, the high incidence of childhood cancer associated with industrial pollution and the lawsuit against the responsible company.
- **Blue Vinyl:** A “toxic comedy” of the harmful effects of PVC plastics and one woman's struggle to get her parents to use healthier alternatives as siding for their house.
- **Erin Brockovich:** The true story of one woman's efforts to stop Pacific Gas & Electric Company from poisoning southern California residents with toxic chemicals.
- **Trade Secrets:** A Bill Moyer's report on the harmful effects of synthetic chemicals.
- **When the Levees Broke:** A Spike Lee film on the disaster of Hurricane Katrina.

For tips on how to start or run a book club, see:
<http://bestsellers.about.com/od/bookclubresources>.





Get involved in community efforts to reduce industrial pollution

Many manufacturing facilities emit harmful pollution through smokestacks or water discharges. Incinerators can also emit harmful fumes when wastes are burned. Once you find out what is going on in your community (see action item to the left) you can get involved in local community groups working for a healthy environment. And if none exist, you can start your own. The following resources will help you get started:

- **Women's Voices for the Earth** provides technical assistance to local groups organizing for a healthier environment: www.womenandenvironment.org.
- **Community Toolbox for Children's Environmental Health** has resources to help address industrial pollution and provides technical assistance and capacity building services: www.communitytoolbox.org.
- **Health Care Without Harm** wrote a toolkit on how to shut down an incinerator: www.noharm.org/toolkit.
- **Scorecard** is an interactive database that documents pollution levels throughout the United States: www.scorecard.org.

Do your part to clean up transportation

Most forms of transportation contribute to air pollution. Driving less, taking the bus or riding a bicycle are good habits to reduce your own emissions. And you can help with bigger changes, such as supporting improved fuel efficiency in cars, reduced idling of diesel school buses, transitioning bus fleets to clean energy and promoting public transportation. Some organizations working on these issues include:

- **Pacific Institute's Freight Transport Campaign:** www.pacinst.org/reports/freight_transport
- **Natural Resources Defense Council's Campaign to Dump Dirty Diesel:** www.nrdc.org/air/transportation/hdiesel.asp
- **West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. (WEACT):** www.weact.org
- **Urban Habitat:** www.urbanhabitat.org/ejhealth
- **Union of Concerned Scientists Clean Buses Initiative** (focuses on school bus emissions): www.ucsusa.org/clean_vehicles/big_rig_cleanup/clean-school-buseswhy-we-care.html

Find out what is going on in your community

Spending a few hours identifying some of the sources of environmental contamination in your community—and the organizing efforts to address them—can provide very useful information about how to work for a healthy environment. Some questions to investigate include:

- **What are the big sources of pollution in my community? Do people live near them?**
- **Are there any local policies addressing environmental contaminants?**
- **What community groups are working for a healthy environment?**
- **What are ways I can get involved?**

See www.womenshealthandenvironment.org/community/local for a more complete list of questions to guide your research.

Make schools a healthy place for kids

Schools should be a safe and healthy place for kids to grow and learn. Unfortunately, many schools lag in making sure that children are not exposed to pesticides, contaminated drinking water, lead paint or indoor air pollution. There are lots of opportunities to work for healthy schools—either by organizing parents in your local school or by advocating for local or state policies that ban or restrict unhealthy practices. To learn more, check out some of these organizations and resources:

- **Healthy Schools Network:** www.healthyschools.org
- **Healthy Schools Campaign Pesticide Action Kit:** www.watoxics.org/files/hs-pak-full-set
- **The Green Schools Initiative:** www.greenschools.net
- **Be Safe Healthy Schools Initiative:** www.besafenet.com/healthyschools.htm
- **Green Flag Program:** www.greenflagschools.org
- **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Healthy Schools Initiative:** www.epa.gov/schools/index.html





Register to vote and then vote every time

Despite the years and hard struggle it took for women to get the right to vote, millions of women do not participate in elections. Polls show that women are strong believers that the government should be doing its best to protect our health. Every woman's vote is needed to help elect representatives who will support good policies such as reducing our exposure to environmental contaminants and providing quality health care to all people. If you are not registered to vote, you can do it online in minutes at **Women's Voices, Women's Vote** (www.women.org/activisttools).

Contact the media

Whenever a newspaper or television station runs a news report or editorial about the connection between our health and the environment, call or write to thank them for the coverage if it is good. If they have covered the issue poorly, your comments can point out the report's weakness and ask them to cover the issues better. Even if the media outlet does not respond immediately or publish your comments, the editors are still sent an important message that their audience cares about these issues and wants them covered responsibly.

For tips on writing letters to the editor, see **Green Media Toolshed's media training webpage:** www.greenmediatoolshed.org.

Talk to your friends and family about our health and the environment

You can share this toolkit with friends, family and co-workers—it is free and easy to download at the Women's Health and the Environment website (www.womenshealthandenvironment.org/toolkit). Email your friends to let them know about it, print out the toolkit and share it with your social circles—church groups, moms groups and other social groups. Tack it to a community bulletin board. Talk with your health care provider about leaving copies in waiting rooms. The website contains all the information in this toolkit and much more.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

—MARY OLIVER

Our wild and precious lives and our wild and precious earth depend on how we answer poet Mary Oliver's question. This booklet and the other information in this toolkit were created to encourage you to work toward a healthy environment for us and for future generations. Imagine a world with less cancer, more justice, lower rates of asthma, cleaner air, fewer babies born with birth defects, abundant and safe drinking water, a decrease in the number of couples facing infertility, healthy products on every store's shelves and a government that works to protect all people and all living things. Your dedication, inspiration and effort can help create that world.

To find out more, go to www.womenshealthandenvironment.org.





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