

Collaborative on Health and the Environment
Fertility and Reproductive Health Working Group
1646 Dow Road
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It is unfortunate the RCOG has received public and even hostile criticism for their report. The report statements are bold (certainly for a medical association) acknowledging the uncertainty in our knowledge about potential harms to pregnancy from environmental exposures. The criticism seems to be claiming that the report doesn't offer helpful information to pregnant women, demanding that women need real answers to what is harmful and what isn't. Women do need these answers; the problem is that no one has the answers yet because the research on many of the important questions simply has not been done. The status quo for a long time has been for health care providers, in the face of uncertainty, to say very little to their patients about potentially harmful exposures during pregnancy. This unfortunately has created a culture where all kinds of exposures have been assumed safe. This report at the very least acknowledges that women should not be so reassured, and should take precautionary steps until we know more.

The end of the report gives these very concrete recommendations that would in fact reduce overall chemical exposure:

- use fresh food rather than processed foods whenever possible
- reduce use of foods/beverages in cans/plastic containers, including their use for food storage
- minimise the use of personal care products such as moisturisers, cosmetics, shower gels and fragrances
- minimise the purchase of newly produced household furniture, fabrics, non-stick frying pans and cars whilst pregnant/nursing
- avoid the use of garden/household/pet pesticides or fungicides (such as fly sprays or strips, rose sprays, flea powders)
- avoid paint fumes
- only take over-the-counter analgesics or painkillers when necessary
- do not assume safety of products based on the absence of 'harmful' chemicals in their ingredients list, or the tag 'natural' (herbal or otherwise).

Unfortunately this otherwise useful list is followed by the following language:

"It is unlikely that any of these exposures are truly harmful for most babies, but in view of current uncertainty about risks, especially those relating to 'mixtures', these steps will reduce environmental chemical exposures."

This does send a confusing message - unlikely to be truly harmful...but worth doing anyway? I think it is in trying to set this balance between not overstating harm and encouraging precaution that the paper has received more criticism than praise.

In our work at Women's Voices for the Earth, we come up against this situation all the time. We want to give women practical advice to reduce their exposure without overstating what we know. The evidence of known harm from common everyday exposures is often lacking, whereas evidence supporting

concern for potential harm is there. In addition, we want to give practical advice that isn't too onerous to actually do and not overwhelm people with the overarching nature of the problem.

To meet this challenge we have found it helpful to include the following types of messaging with our materials:

- 1) Until we know more, here are some practical things you can do today...
- 2) The problem of toxic chemical exposure is not something any one individual can control all by themselves. It is a societal responsibility to figure out what is dangerous and to put prevention measures in place. "We are all in this together - you can't take it on alone"
- 3) For the many exposures you cannot control, your body's immune system is your best defense. So keeping yourself healthy (eating right, getting exercise, getting enough sleep, etc.) are important measures to help protect you from inevitable toxic exposures.

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Women's Voices for the Earth is a national organization that works to eliminate toxic chemicals that harm women's health by changing consumer behaviors, corporate practices and government policies. To learn more visit: <http://www.womensvoices.org>