

## ***Environmental Toxicity: A New Kind of Homesickness***

By Ryan Harrison, MA

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What would you bet that if you and I were to take a walk through your home or office, I could find and point out at least a dozen toxic health hazards? Sure, you've heard about how dangerous the mercury in thermometers is, and you know to never mix ammonia and bleach. But what you may not be aware of is that most living and working spaces are filled with toxic substances that are not only invisible to the naked eye, but so common to our everyday routines that they are practically beyond reproach. Oh, and did I mention that just about all of them are given the "thumb's up" by government agencies designed to protect our health? It probably sounds like conspiracy theory...until you start reading some of the latest research on the subject.

Synthetic chemicals are at the center of practically everything around you, from the carpet you walk on to the gel in your hair. It all started with the chemical and petroleum revolutions of the 1940s and 50s. Scientists discovered that they could manipulate the chains of hydrocarbon molecules in crude oil and then combine them with all sorts of other materials, giving them a seemingly endless selection of new substances never before seen on planet earth. The net result of this petrochemical explosion is that tens of thousands of new products made their way quickly and easily into the average person's life...and have stayed there. These were products that made life "better," or at least more convenient, and many of them are still used today.

Lately, however, people are discovering that not everything that comes out of a lab is good for you...or other living things...or even the planet, for that matter. Some of these petrochemicals, in fact, are so dangerous that they have moved from the "thumb's up" list to the toxic hazard list as they have become recognized as hormone disruptors, carcinogens or neurotoxins. Of course, that doesn't mean we're not exposed to them. Some of these chemicals are so resistant to biodegradation that they are still in our air, water and soil today, decades after their use ceased.

Have you ever felt worse after being in a certain building or room of your home? It's possible that toxins are at play in any home or work environment in which you find yourself unwell. This is termed "Sick Building Syndrome," (SBS) a kind of global health hazard in which building occupants experience acute health effects that appear to be linked to time spent in a particular building, though no specific illness or cause can be readily identified.<sup>1</sup> SBS is the result of living and working spaces that are poorly ventilated and therefore particularly well-suited for keeping toxic chemicals trapped inside with their occupants. What many people don't realize is that the chemical nature of the materials used to build and furnish our homes and offices is feeding directly into the toxic burden our bodies must bear.

And then there's "Multiple Chemical Sensitivities" or MCS, a fairly new medical diagnosis that has finally made the books. This is a complex issue, because unlike other ailments, it cannot be traced back to a specific bacteria or virus. In fact, its causes are countless, making it very difficult to diagnose, let alone treat. MCS results from either a single high exposure to a particular chemical toxin or repeated low-level exposure to the thousands of chemicals that

surround us. After these initiating exposures, a chronic phase begins during which ongoing symptoms manifest and are triggered by even extremely low exposures to any number of toxic chemicals. Symptoms of MCS include prolonged fatigue, memory difficulties, dizziness, trouble concentrating, depression, grogginess, anxiety, trouble breathing, irritability, muscle and joint aches and pains, headaches, chest pains, nausea...the list goes on and on.<sup>2</sup>

What makes SBS and MCS difficult to pinpoint and label is simply that there are thousands of chemicals around us all the time interacting in thousands of ways, and manifesting differently in different people. What causes you to have a headache might send me home with vertigo and yet the same chemical combination may be the root cause of both health issues. And unfortunately, because the list of symptoms is so large and made up of issues that can result from many different compromises in health, diagnosis and isolation are very difficult.

It's possible that many people are ill due to SBS or MCS. How many friends or loved ones do you know who experience troubling ailments from headaches to cancer and cannot seem to figure out why or how these things happen? Is it a coincidence that over the last fifty years, rates of cancer, asthma and other serious diseases have gone up, especially in children, the population most susceptible to chemical pollution? These are questions that we need to ask ourselves whenever we luxuriate in the "new car smell" or spray air freshener on our way out of the bathroom. Chemicals, chemicals everywhere...

In the service of education, let's take a look at these facts, taken from respected sources:<sup>3,4</sup>

- Most drinking water contains over 700 chemicals, including excessive amounts of the heavy metal lead.
- Some 3,000 chemicals are added to the food supply.
- As many as 10,000 chemicals in the form of solvents, emulsifiers, and preservatives are used in food processing and storage.
- The government has tallied 5,000 chemical ingredients in cosmetics; more than 3,200 chemicals added to food; 1,010 chemicals used in 11,700 consumer products; and 500 chemicals used as active ingredients in pesticides.
- In 1998 U.S. industries reported manufacturing 6.5 trillion pounds of 9,000 different chemicals, and in 2000 major U.S. industries reported dumping 7.1 billion pounds of 650 industrial chemicals into our air and water.

If these numbers startle you, that's a good thing. No one knows how long some of these chemicals remain inside us once they are ingested or otherwise introduced to the body, though science has determined that many of them biodegrade very slowly or, in some frightening cases, not at all. Yet even the toxins that our bodies *do* know how to break down require extra metabolic energy expenditure to complete the detoxification process. That means less energy for other important things, like keeping the immune system up to speed.

A recent groundbreaking study was conducted by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, in collaboration with the Environmental Working Group and Commonweal. Researchers at two major laboratories found an average of 91 industrial compounds, pollutants, and other chemicals in the blood and urine of only nine volunteers, with a total of 167 chemicals found in

the group. Like most of us, the nine people tested do not work with chemicals on the job and do not live near an industrial facility. Of the 167 chemicals found in those nine tested individuals, 76 are known to cause cancer in humans or animals, 94 are toxic to the brain and nervous system, and 79 cause birth defects or abnormal development. What's more, the danger of exposure to these chemicals in combination has never been studied.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Marshall Mandell, one of the world's leading allergists and the father of bio-ecologic medicine stated: "The current level of chemicals in the food and water supply, and the indoor and outdoor environment, has lowered our threshold of resistance to disease and has altered our body's metabolism, causing enzyme dysfunction, nutritional deficiencies, and hormonal imbalances."<sup>6</sup>

So what can you do? There are several choices you can make which will have a positive impact on your health and wellbeing. The following list is synergistic; choosing to follow one suggestion is great, but the more you implement the stronger your body and better your health will be.

- Complete an all-natural detoxification program. There are many of these on the market and the best ones will use a combination of vitamins, minerals and herbs to give your body the extra help it needs to clean itself out on the cellular level.
- Choose organic when you shop for food whenever possible. The less chemicals you ingest, the better.
- Keep your home and workspace well ventilated, especially after painting, laying down new carpet, or any kind of chemical use.
- Purify the air. Believe it or not, plants work just as well as expensive air purifiers, and a variety of houseplants will make a major difference in your indoor air quality.
- Buy and use only non-toxic, environmentally-friendly cleaning products.
- Eat a well-balanced diet comprised of whole foods and drink plenty of purified water. This gives your body the fuel it needs to run optimally and the ability to flush out toxins.
- Get adequate exercise and plenty of rest. Your body requires these things to stay strong and healthy.

### Everyday Toxins

If you use or are in contact with any of the below commonplace items or substances, you could be subjecting yourself to harmful toxic chemicals. Yes, it's a long list...and it isn't exhaustive. Visit <http://www.ewg.org/reports/bodyburden/dynam-mfgs.php> to see a more complete list and to find additional details.

Adhesives	Aerosols	Ammunition
Anti-lock brakes	Batteries	Bleach
Brake fluid	Cables	Carpet
Ceramics	Chipping paint in older homes	Colognes
Computers	Contact lens cleaning solution	Cosmetics
Crystal tableware	Dental fillings	Detergents
Drugs	Dyes	Electronic equipment
Erasable ink	Floor cleaners	Fluorescent lamps
Food (additives)	Food (flavorings)	Food packaging
Fungicides	Gasoline	Glass
Hair spray	Hand cleaners	Hand cream
Insect repellent	Insecticide	Latex paint
Light switches in cars	Liquid soap	Lotion
Lubricants	Medical devices	Medication
Mosquito repellent	Nail polishes	Paint
Paper	Perfume	Pesticides
Plastic	Rubber	Rubbing alcohol
Rug shampoos	Seafood	Shampoo
Shaving cream	Soap	Spot cleaners
Spot removers	Stain/varnishes	Thermometers
Thermostats	Tire cleaners	Vaccinations
VCR head cleaners	Wax strippers	Windshield cleaners
Wood finishes	X-ray shields	And more...

<sup>1</sup> *Environmental Medicine*, Global College of Natural Medicine, © 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Hollender, Jeffrey & Davis, Geoff, *Naturally Clean*, New Society Publishers, © 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Goldberg, Burton. *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. © 2002

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bodyburden.org>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Goldberg, Burton. *Alternative Medicine: The Definitive Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. © 2002, pg. 168.