

Toxic Chemicals: Steps to Stay Safer Before and During Pregnancy

Frequently Asked Questions

What are toxic chemicals?

Chemicals are all around us—in the air, water, soil, the food we eat, and the products we use. Some chemicals are known to be toxic, which means that they can harm a person’s health. If you know about common sources of toxic chemicals, you can try to reduce your contact or avoid them altogether.

Why are toxic chemicals a problem before and during pregnancy?

The effects of many chemicals are not known. But scientists think that some chemicals may make it harder for you to get pregnant. Some chemicals are also known to have harmful effects during pregnancy. Some [miscarriages](#) and [birth defects](#) may be linked to toxic chemicals. Some types of contact with chemicals during pregnancy may also be linked to

- early birth
- [low birth weight](#)
- learning difficulties or problems with thinking and reasoning starting in childhood
- cancer in childhood or adulthood

More research is needed to understand the link between toxic chemicals and these health concerns. Scientists are still learning about the impact of chemicals on health and what type of contact is most harmful.

You may be able to decrease your risk of problems by taking the steps described on this page and talking with your [obstetrician–gynecologist \(ob-gyn\)](#) . Your ob-gyn can try to help you find ways to avoid toxic chemicals if you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant.

How can I make safer food and drink choices?

Toxic chemicals can be found in food and food packaging—especially in plastic packaging, fast food wrappers, some canned food, and some produce that is not organic. These tips can help you avoid toxic chemicals in your diet:

- When possible, heat up food and drinks in glass or ceramic containers. Do not heat up food or drinks in plastic containers or wrappers.
- Try to increase the number of meals you make at home and try to use fresh, local food. Avoid fast food or eat it less often.
- Choose canned food labeled as BPA-free when possible. BPA, or bisphenol A, is a toxic chemical used in some cans.
- Try to eat food labeled as USDA organic if you can. (Organic food is grown without pesticides, which are toxic chemicals used on some farms. The U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] certifies that food is organic.)
- Wash fruits and vegetables with water, even if you plan to peel them. This is important for all food, no matter if it is organic or not organic.

Is it safe to eat fish during pregnancy?

Yes, it is safe to eat many types of fish during pregnancy. Fish has important nutrients for you and your [fetus](#) . Read [Nutrition During Pregnancy](#) to learn more.

One toxic chemical called mercury is found in some types of fish. Some fish have higher levels of mercury than others. During pregnancy, do not eat bigeye tuna, king mackerel, marlin, orange roughy, shark, swordfish, or tilefish. Limit white (albacore) tuna to only 6 ounces (oz) a week.

If you eat fresh fish from the area near your home, check local information to learn if it is safe for pregnant women. If you cannot find out, eat no more than 6 oz of it, and avoid eating any other fish that week.

How can I choose safer kitchen supplies and containers?

Store food in glass, ceramic, or stainless-steel containers. Try to avoid heating or cooking food in plastic containers. Some plastics contain chemicals that can get into your food and drinks.

If possible, avoid using nonstick pots, pans, or other cookware. The nonstick coating contains chemicals that may cause low birth weight. Ceramic, stainless-steel, and cast iron cookware are options that do not contain a nonstick coating.

Also avoid pottery made outside the United States. Do not store, cook, or serve food in containers made of pewter, brass, or lead crystal. These materials can contain lead, which can be harmful to you and your fetus.

How can I choose safer beauty and personal care products?

Read the list of ingredients on beauty and personal care products. When possible, avoid products that contain

- phthalates
- parabens
- oxybenzone
- triclosan

Also look for products marked “fragrance free.” This is different from “unscented.” Unscented products may contain multiple scents that are mixed to hide an odor. These scents may contain harmful chemicals.

Products that are designed to make your skin lighter or your hair straighter may contain chemicals that are not on the label. Some of these products have been found to contain toxic chemicals. Hair dye usually is safe to use during pregnancy.

You can learn more about the safety of specific personal care products by searching for an ingredient, brand, or product on the [Environmental Working Group website](#).

How can I choose safer cleaning products?

It is easy and cheap to make your own everyday cleaning products with common items like vinegar and baking soda. You can also look for cleaning products that are labeled as nontoxic. You can look at product safety ratings on the [Environmental Working Group's Guide to Healthy Cleaning](#).

Avoid having your clothes dry cleaned, if possible. Many dry-cleaning systems use toxic chemicals. Most clothes labeled “dry-clean only” can be washed with water.

What else should I know about cleaning my house?

Lead is a toxic chemical that was once common in paint, metal pipes, and other items. Lead may also be present in dirt and dust in your home. Using a wet cloth to clean floors and surfaces can pick up dirt and dust instead of spreading it into the air. This is safer than using a dry cloth or duster.

You can also help keep your home clean by taking off or changing your shoes when you get home. Shoes worn outside can track chemicals into your home from the ground outside.

What else should I know about lead and paint?

If your home was built before 1978, it may have old paint or pipes that contain lead. Lead paint can be covered with fresh paint, wallpaper, or tiles. But you should try not to do any home repairs or remodeling, including sanding or scraping paint, in an older home when you are pregnant. And you should never remove lead paint yourself. Call the National Lead Information Center at 1-800-424-LEAD to learn what to do about lead.

Many paints include other substances that may be harmful. Paints that are labeled “low-VOC,” “zero-VOC,” or “water-based” may have less harmful chemicals. (VOC stands for volatile organic compounds, a type of chemical that can enter the air.) But these paints may still release chemicals.

What should I do about toxic chemicals at work?

Some jobs are more likely to expose you to toxic chemicals. Talk with your ob-gyn about ways to stay as safe as possible if you work in

- farming
- factory work
- dry cleaning
- beauty salons
- cleaning and custodial services
- health care for humans and animals

Make sure your employer knows you are pregnant. Your employer is required to make sure your workplace does not harm your health. You can request changes to your job to help keep you safe.

The [Occupational Safety and Health Administration \(OSHA\)](#) protects workers from unsafe and unhealthy conditions in the workplace. You can contact OSHA if you have questions or concerns about your workplace.

What should I know about air pollution and extreme heat?

Air pollution and extreme heat are linked to problems with pregnancy, including [preterm](#) birth. Both indoor and outdoor air can be polluted. You may be exposed to more air pollution if you live or work near a coal power plant or a fracking site.

Follow local alerts about air quality and extreme heat. Avoid exercising outside if there is poor air quality or if it is much hotter than normal. During extreme heat waves, drink plenty of water.

Tobacco smoke is a common source of indoor air pollution. If you smoke, [try to quit](#), and encourage the people in your home to do so too.

What else can I do to avoid toxic chemicals?

- Wash your hands often. Hand sanitizer removes germs, but you need soap and water to remove chemicals.
- Avoid people who are smoking, and do not smoke.

- If you have pets, avoid using flea collars, flea soap, or any medicine you put on the pet's fur, if possible. Ask your veterinarian for other ways to control pests or itching.
- Avoid using bug spray or bug bombs at home or in your yard.
- Talk with your ob-gyn about chemicals you may be exposed to at home or work. You can do this as soon as you know you are pregnant, or even when you start thinking about getting pregnant. Your ob-gyn can try to help you find ways to avoid or reduce your contact with toxic chemicals.

Resources

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

www.epa.gov

A main source for information on toxins in your environment, including foods such as fish and home toxins such as lead.

Occupational Safety and Health Administration

www.osha.gov/workers

A resource for worker rights and protection, including understanding your rights and asking for help.

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

www.cdc.gov/niosh

Educational information about workplace safety and health.

Environmental Working Group

www.ewg.org

A nonprofit with search tools and other resources to help you choose safer food and products.

University of California San Francisco Program on Reproductive Health and the Environment

<https://prhe.ucsf.edu/info>

Information to help families reduce exposure to toxic chemicals.

Campion Fund: Pollution and Reproduction

<https://campionfund.org/pollution-reproduction>

Videos that explain how pollution harms male reproduction, female reproduction, and pregnancy.

Glossary

Birth Defects: Physical problems that are present at birth.

Fetus: The stage of human development beyond 8 completed weeks after fertilization.

Low Birth Weight: Weighing less than 5½ pounds (2,500 grams) at birth.

Miscarriage: Loss of a pregnancy that is in the uterus.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women’s health.

Preterm: Less than 37 weeks of pregnancy.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

FAQ528

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