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Health Canada

Healthy Environments for Children

What You Can Do!

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Canada

Healthy Environments for Children

What You Can Do!

Children come into closer contact with their environment than adults.

They crawl on the floor and the ground, put their fingers in their mouths and because of their curious nature touch and taste things without knowing if they are harmful.

They may also be more sensitive to some harmful substances because of their stage of development.

As a parent or caregiver you have an important role to play in providing a healthy environment for your child(ren).

This booklet has information on what you can do and gives Internet links and telephone numbers for more information.

Your local Public Health Department may have information on providing healthy environments for children.



Washing Hands

Hand-washing with warm water and soap after going to the bathroom, touching animals, and before every meal helps to prevent infection and reduce exposure to harmful substances your child may have touched.



Tips for hand washing include:

- Use warm water.
- Lather with soap for 10 to 15 seconds. Any soap will do.
- Have your child(ren) sing a favourite song while hand-washing to help them wash for a longer time.
- Rinse hands and dry well with a clean towel.

Taking Shoes Off When You Come Inside

The soil outside your home can contain a number of substances you do not want inside.

Taking your shoes off when you come



inside is one way to reduce the amount of these substances in your home.

Preventing Breathing Problems

The quality of indoor and outdoor air affects children's ability to breathe easily.

To help your child(ren) breathe more easily:

Outdoor Air

- Listen to the radio or watch television reports for information about air quality and smog advisories. Plan your day based on this information.



- Consider limiting or rescheduling physical outdoor activities on smog advisory days when air pollution is more harmful than usual.
- Reduce exposure to motor vehicle exhaust by limiting physical activity near heavy traffic areas, particularly at rush hour.
- Stop unnecessary vehicle idling. This is an easy way to help improve the air quality in your community.

Indoor Air

- Prevent anyone from smoking in your car or home. Infants and children exposed to second hand smoke are more likely to suffer from respiratory disease, ear infections, allergies and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- Keep your home as clean as possible. Dust and vacuum rugs and upholstery regularly. For children with asthma, dust, mold and pet dander can trigger asthma attacks and allergies.
- Reduce your use of aerosol sprays indoors.

For more information on second-hand smoke, consult **The Facts About Tobacco: What is Second-Hand Smoke?** at www.gosmokefree.ca or call the Tobacco Control Programme at 1-866-318-1116.

For information on air quality and health visit Health Canada's Air Quality website at www.healthcanada.ca/air or call the Air Health Effects Division at (613) 957-1876.

Protect Children from Too Much Sun

Too much sun can be harmful. The sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays can

cause painful sunburn and lead to skin cancer. This is especially true for babies and children because their skin burns easily.

To protect your child(ren) from the sun:

- Keep babies under one year of age out of direct sunlight. They should be in the shade, under a tree, umbrella or stroller canopy.
- Do not use sunscreen on babies less than 6 months old. Keep them in the shade.



- Dress children in protective clothing (light colours with long sleeves and pants), including a broad brim hat, AND use sunscreen with a Sun Protection Factor (SPF) of at least 15 whenever they are in direct sunlight.
- Be sure to use lots of sunscreen lotion and reapply every two hours as well as after swimming.
- Keep children out of the sun between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. when the sun's rays are strongest, unless they are well-protected by clothing and sunscreen.

- Take extra care on days when the UV level is high.
- Don't think that children are safe just because it's cloudy. The sun's harmful rays can get through fog, haze, and light cloud cover.
- Bring water or some juice for your child(ren) to drink when they are outside.

For more information on sun protection please call the Consumer and Clinical Radiation Protection Bureau at (613) 954-6699 or visit the following websites:

A Parent's Guide to Sun Protection: Protecting Your Family
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/ccrpb/protection.htm

A Parent's Guide to Sun Protection: Sun Fiction and Fact
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/ccrpb/fiction_fact.htm

Ultraviolet Radiation from the Sun
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/ultraviolet.html

Sunglasses
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/products/sunglasses.html

Sunscreens
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/lifestyles/sunscreen.html

Information about Products Containing Sunscreen and DEET:
www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pmra-arla/english/pdf/pnotes/deet-e.pdf

Protect Children from Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a harmful gas that has no colour, odour or taste. Even at low levels of exposure, carbon monoxide can cause serious health problems. CO is harmful because it will rapidly accumulate in the blood, reducing the ability of blood to carry oxygen.

To reduce the risk of exposure to CO:

- Open your garage door before starting your car.
- If you have a natural gas or propane clothes dryer, clean its ductwork and outside vent cover regularly to make sure they are not blocked.
- Have a qualified professional check your furnace and chimney every year.
- Check your fireplace to make sure the flues are open before lighting a fire. If the chimney does not draw, call a fireplace professional.
- Do not use propane, natural gas or charcoal barbecue grills indoors, in an attached garage, or in any other enclosed area.
- Never run gasoline-powered tools such as lawnmowers, snowblowers, or grass trimmers inside a garage.

More tips to reduce the risk of exposure to CO

- Avoid the use of all kerosene heaters indoors or in a garage. They produce CO and other pollutants. If you must use a kerosene heater indoors, be sure it is meant to be used inside. Review and follow the instructions before every use.
- Put at least one CO detector in your home as a good safety precaution - in some cities it is the law. It is best to have one CO detector on each floor of your home. CO detectors should be replaced every 3 to 5 years.

For more information on eliminating sources of CO in your home and CO detectors, visit www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/burema/gesein/abhose/abhose_ce25.cfm or call the Canadian Housing Information Centre at (613) 748-2367.



Keep Pesticides Away from Children

A pesticide is any substance used to control pests such as insects, mice and weeds.

Pesticides are poisonous.

Poison Control (Information) Centres across Canada often receive calls about children who have swallowed a pesticide that was not stored properly.

To protect your children from coming in contact with pesticides:

- Wash fruits and vegetables under running water before eating them.
- Avoid the use of pesticides in and around your home. Check for alternatives such as sealing cracks to prevent pests from entering your home.

If you do need to use a pesticide product:

- Review the pesticide product label or safety sheet carefully before every use.
- Keep children, pets and toys away when pesticides are applied either inside or outside your home. If a pesticide comes into contact with toys, wash them with water before using.



- Read the label or information sheet to find out when children can return to the treated area. If you are unsure of the recommended time, keep them away from the area for at least 24 hours.
- Put up signs to notify neighbours where a pesticide has been used so their children may also be kept away from the treated area.
- Store pesticides in their original containers. Children may mistake other containers for food or drink.
- Store pesticides in a locked area out of the sight and reach of children.

If your child has swallowed a pesticide:

- Call a Poison Control (Information) Centre immediately and seek medical attention if you suspect your child has swallowed a pesticide.
- Keep the phone number of the Poison Control (Information) Centre by the phone.

- Phone numbers of Poison Control (Information) Centres can be found at the front of your local telephone directory.
- When you call the Poison Control (Information) Centre, you need to know the name of the product, amount taken, and the time of the incident.
- Follow the first aid statement on the pesticide label and take the pesticide container or label with you to the emergency facility or physician.

For more information on pesticide use visit **Pesticide Use In and Around the Home** at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pmra-arla/english/pdf/pnotes/homeuse-e.pdf or call the Pest Management Information Service at 1-800-267-6315.

For more information about maintaining a healthy lawn, consult **Healthy Lawns** at www.healthylawns.net/english/index-e.html or call the Pest Management Information Service at 1-800-267-6315.

For more information on pressure treated wood, consult Health Canada's Fact Sheet on Chromated Copper Arsenate (CCA) Treated Wood found at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pmra-arla/english/pdf/fact/fs_cca-e.pdf or call the Pest Management Information Service at 1-800-267-6315.

Using Personal Insect Repellents Safely

Parents and caregivers have always tried to protect their children from mosquito bites. Now that mosquitoes can carry the West Nile virus, there is even more concern about their bites. For most Canadians, the risk of illness from West Nile virus is low, and the risk of serious health effects is even lower.

To help prevent mosquito bites, the use of a personal insect repellent should be considered. Never use personal insect repellents on children under 6 months of age, and for children under two years of age it is advisable to use mosquito netting around their carriages rather than personal insect repellents, unless a high risk of complications from insect bites exist.

Repellents containing soybean oil, P-menthane 3,8-diol, Citronella, Lavender and DEET are currently registered for use in Canada.

Mosquitoes are most active between dusk and dawn. To help prevent mosquito bites during this time, avoid mosquito areas and dress your child(ren) in long-sleeved, light-coloured clothing with a tight weave.

For all types of personal insect repellents:

- Read the label carefully before using. Pay special attention to the maximum number of applications allowed per day, the age restrictions for use, and the protection times.
- Do not put repellent on children's faces and hands. This will reduce their chances of getting it in their eyes and mouths. If it does get into their eyes, rinse immediately with water.
- Do not apply repellent on sunburns, open wounds or skin irritations.
- Apply as little of the repellent as possible to exposed skin surfaces or on top of clothing. Never use it under clothing.



- Put on insect repellent only in well-ventilated areas. Never use it near food.
- If using a sunscreen product that contains insect repellent, use the product as a repellent and apply sparingly.
- If using a separate sunscreen and repellent together, apply the sunscreen first, wait 20 minutes, and then apply the insect repellent.
- Wash treated skin with soap and water when you return indoors or when protection is no longer needed.

Guidelines for using personal insect repellents containing DEET include:

For children under 6 months of age:

- NEVER use personal insect repellents containing DEET. Instead consider alternative methods of protection such as protective clothing and mosquito netting.

For children aged 6 months to 2 years:

- Apply once a day only in situations where a high risk of complications from insect bites exist.
- Use products labelled 10% DEET or less.
- Avoid using over a prolonged period.

For children between 2 and 12 years of age:

- Apply no more than 3 times per day.
- Use products labelled 10% DEET or less.
- Avoid using for a prolonged period.

For children of 12 years of age or older:

- Use products labelled 30% DEET or less.

For more information please consult **Safety Tips on Using Personal Insect Repellents** at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/westnile/insect_repellents.html for more tips, or call the Pest Management Information Service at 1-800-267-6315.

For more information on the West Nile virus please see www.westnilevirus.gc.ca or call the National West Nile Virus Info-line at 1-800-816-7292.

Keep Mold Levels Down in Your Home

Mold inside your home can be a health concern.

Mold grows when there is too much humidity and condensation from building leaks, cooking, washing, flooding etc.

Mold can lead to allergic reactions and respiratory diseases.

Reducing mold levels in your home is one way to help your child(ren) breathe more easily.

To reduce the risk of exposure to mold:

- Make sure that there are no wet spots in your house such as: damp basements, leaking bathroom sinks, cold closets on exterior walls, etc.
- Check for and fix water leaks. Repair leaky roofs, walls, and basements.
- Ensure that your home is adequately ventilated.
- Circulate air and prevent moisture build-up by installing and using exhaust fans vented to the outdoors in kitchens and bathrooms.
- Check that your clothes dryer exhausts to the outdoors. Remove lint before every use.
- Discard clutter and excess stored materials in basements. Molds grow on fabrics, cardboard, paper, wood, and anything that collects dust and holds moisture.
- Discard or clean water-damaged materials such as carpets quickly to avoid mold growth.
- Wash or change shower curtains monthly and keep bathtub and shower areas free from mold build-up.
- Get rid of mold on surfaces by removing the source of moisture. Scrub the moldy area with a mild cleaning detergent. Rinse by



sponging with a clean, wet rag. Repeat. Dry the area quickly and completely. Make sure that there is good air circulation when cleaning.

- Cleaning up mold can be complex, for steps on cleaning up mold consult Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's **Fighting Mold – The Homeowners' Guide** at www.schl.ca/en/burema/gesein/abhose/abhose_ce08.cfm

For more information on measuring humidity in your home, consult the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's (CMHC) publication, **Measuring Humidity in Your Home: Do You Have a Humidity Problem?** at www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/burema/gesein/abhose/abhose_ce01.cfm.

For more information on bathroom and kitchen fans, consult CMHC's **The Importance of Bathroom and Kitchen Fans** at www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/burema/gesein/abhose/abhose_ce17.cfm.

For copies of these publications call CMHC's national office at 1-800-668-2642 .

Protect Children from Mercury in Fish

Eating high amounts of mercury can cause damage to the nervous system. Pregnant women and young children are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of mercury.

Of the different kinds of foods we eat, fish is usually the largest source of mercury. This is because mercury in lakes, streams and oceans can build up in the bodies of some fish.



Fish are an excellent source of high-quality protein and are low in saturated fat which makes them a healthy food choice.

To reduce the risk of exposure to fish contaminated by mercury:

When eating fish bought from the store:

- Limit eating swordfish, shark, or fresh and frozen tuna to one meal per month for young children, pregnant women, and women of child-bearing age. This restriction does not apply to canned tuna.

When sport fishing:

- Watch for local fish advisories that may indicate high levels of mercury and other contaminants in fish.
- Contact your provincial authority for information about eating recreationally caught freshwater fish.
- A list of provincial authorities is given at www.inspection.gc.ca/english/related/provincese.shtml or check your phone book for a provincial government contact related to food, agriculture or fisheries.

For more information, visit **Information on Mercury Levels in Fish:** www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/protection/warnings/2002/2002_41e.htm or call the Canadian Food Inspection Agency at 1-800-442-2342.

Protect Children from Polluted Water

Good quality water is a high priority for everyone's health, especially that of children. There are many potential sources of contamination including: agricultural runoff, faulty septic systems, and storm sewers.

To reduce children's exposure to polluted water, be alert for beach closings that result from bacterial contamination.

Providing Safe Drinking Water

If your drinking water comes from a well make sure it is safe by having it tested two or three times a year.

For more information on well water, consult **What's In Your Well? – A Guide to Well Water Treatment and Maintenance** at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/water/factsheets/treatment_guide.htm or call your local Public Health Department.



Protecting Children from Exposure to Lead

Lead is an inexpensive metal with many uses. However, it can cause many harmful health effects, especially to the nervous system and kidneys. Exposure to even very low levels of lead can cause learning disabilities and other harmful effects on children's development.

To reduce your family's risk of lead exposure:

- If your home was built before 1960, you should assume that lead was used in the original exterior and interior paint. Lead paint which is chipping or peeling is a serious health hazard, especially to children who might eat it. In such cases the paint should be contained or removed following the guidelines in the booklet **Lead in Your Home**. Call the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation at 1-800-668-2642 to obtain a printed copy.
- It is important to review this booklet before starting any renovation project in an older home. Renovations that are improperly carried out can greatly increase the risk of lead exposure from leaded paint.
- Plumbing systems may have solder or other parts that contain lead. Because lead will leach into water sitting in pipes, always let



the water run until it is cold before using it for drinking, cooking, and especially for making baby formula. Do not use water from the hot water tap for cooking or drinking. If you are concerned about elevated lead levels in your home's drinking water, contact your local Public Health Department.

- Costume jewellery containing lead is a health hazard for children who chew or suck on it. Ask when you purchase children's jewellery to make sure it does not contain lead.
- Discourage children from putting non-food items in their mouths.
- When drinks are stored in leaded crystal containers some lead may dissolve into the liquid. Do not store liquids in lead crystal containers, or serve pregnant women or children drinks in crystal glasses.

For more information on the health effects of lead, please call Health Canada's Information and Education Health Unit at (613) 952-1014 or consult the following websites:

Lead-based Paint:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/products/leadpaint.html

Lead Crystalware and Your Health:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/products/crystal_lead.html

Lead Information Package – Some Commonly Asked Questions About Lead and Human Health:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/toxics_management/publications/leadQandA/toc.htm

Effects of Lead on Human Health:

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/lead.html

Reducing Unintentional Exposure to Household Chemicals

Household chemicals are safe if used and stored as recommended.

Chemical products commonly found throughout the home include: cleaning liquids and powders, polishers, drain cleaners, paint thinners and windshield washers.

Use the following tips to keep your child safe from household chemicals:

- Learn what the symbols and safety warnings on the labels of household chemicals mean.
- Teach children that the symbols on product labels mean: DANGER! DO NOT TOUCH.
- Read the label. If there is anything in the label instructions that you don't understand, ask for help.
- Make sure the labels on containers are not removed or covered up.
- Lock all chemical products out of the sight and reach of children. Household chemical containers, even if sealed or empty, are not toys. Never let children play with them.
- Close the cap on the container tightly, even if you set it down for just a moment. Make sure that child-resistant containers are working. Child-resistant does not mean child-proof!
- Keep household chemicals in their original containers. Never store chemicals in pop bottles or other food containers.
- Never mix chemicals together. Some mixtures can produce harmful gases.

- Consider using non-toxic alternatives such as baking soda instead of commercial cleaning products.
- Buy the smallest quantity of chemical products needed for the job. Unwanted portions should be disposed of at a hazardous waste depot. Contact your local municipal or county office for locations nearest you.

If you suspect your child has swallowed a household chemical:

- Call a Poison Control (Information) Centre immediately and seek medical attention.
- Keep the phone number of the Poison Control (Information) Centre by the phone.
- Phone numbers of Poison Control (Information) Centres can be found at the front of your local telephone directory.
- When you call the Poison Control (Information) Centre, you need to know the name of the product, amount taken, and the time of the incident.



For more information on product labels and symbols, consult **Do You Know What These Symbols Mean?** at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/cps/publications/hazard.htm, or call Health Canada's Information and Education Health Unit at (613) 952-1014.

Using Arts and Crafts Materials Safely

The most common health hazards from working with arts and crafts materials are cuts from knives or scissors.

However, there can be risks from a few of the materials themselves, such as some colourings and solvents.

To help your child stay safe when doing arts and crafts:

- Supervise children with arts and crafts materials.
- Choose non-toxic products.
- Always follow safety instructions given on the label.
- Keep materials in their original containers so that you can refer to the label instructions every time they are used.
- Store all arts and crafts materials that should be used under supervision out of the reach and sight of children.
- Do not allow children to eat or drink when using arts and crafts materials.



- Do arts and crafts in a well-ventilated area.

Some arts and crafts materials are never safe for children to use:

- Paint that is not identified as non-toxic, ceramic glaze, copper enamel and solder for stained glass may contain lead or cadmium.
- Shellac, paint strippers and craft dyes may contain solvents with toluene or methyl alcohol, which may cause blindness or other serious health effects if swallowed. Check the label for the ingredients of the product.

For pregnant or breastfeeding women:

- Do not work with solvents, lead compounds or dust-producing materials. If you are contemplating pregnancy or are pregnant consult your physician with respect to the effects of toxic arts materials.

For further information, consult **Arts and Crafts** at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/products/arts.html, or call Health Canada at (613) 957-2991.