

# *A Whiff of Toxicity?*



## *Fragrances in consumer products and their impact on our health*

Fragranced consumer products are ubiquitous. In addition to products sold explicitly as fragrance, such as perfumes and air fresheners, fragrance is added to a wide range of products such as shampoos, soaps, makeup, laundry products, household cleaners, candles, and toys. The smell of a product often guides our consumer choices. But does it also influence our health?

We have scant information available about the complex and proprietary mix of industrial chemicals added to consumer products as fragrance. Our chemicals regulatory system requires only the most minimal testing for adverse health effects, and the presence of chemicals in products is often undisclosed, as our regulatory system values the importance of confidential business information – often above public health. This leaves us with little information about the health effects of the products we use every day, including about the mix of chemicals that comprise the fragrance in a product.

The little information we do have about fragrances points to the presence of potentially dangerous chemicals in these complex synthetic mixtures.

### **Facts and Figures:**

- An estimated 80% of personal care products contain fragrance.
- These fragrances are typically a mixture of several dozen to several hundred chemicals.
- Some of these are sensitizing chemicals associated with allergic reactions, asthma, wheezing, headaches and contact dermatitis.
- Others are hormone-disrupting chemicals linked to reproductive damage, thyroid disruption, and cancer.

### **Where is Fragrance Found?**

- |                                 |   |                              |
|---------------------------------|---|------------------------------|
| - personal fragrances, perfumes | - | - hand sanitizer             |
| - scented laundry detergent     | - | - air freshener              |
| - soap                          | - | - candles                    |
| - body lotion                   | - | - numerous cleaning products |

### **Legal protections:**

- The chemicals contained in fragrances are largely unstudied and unregulated.
- Ingredients in fragrances do not need to be listed on a product's label because they are protected as "trade secrets."
- For all products, the general term "fragrance" or "perfume" can be listed on the label in place of the specific ingredients in the fragrance.
- The safety of the chemicals in fragrances is *not* assessed by any publicly accountable agency or by cosmetics industry self-policing review panels.

### **Effects on Human Health:**

- Fragranced products are associated with a range of adverse health effects, such as migraine headaches, asthma attacks, mucosal symptoms, respiratory irritation, and contact dermatitis.
- Fragrance sensitivity is widespread. In surveys, more than 30% of Americans report adverse effects when exposed to fragranced products, and 19% report breathing difficulties, headaches, or other health problems when exposed to air fresheners and deodorizers. Percentages are nearly twice as high for asthmatics.
- Chemicals in fragranced products include known carcinogens. For example, emissions from dryer vents, during the use of fragranced laundry products, include numerous Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) that affect outdoor air quality, such as acetaldehyde, a probable carcinogen and Hazardous Air Pollutant.
- *Phthalates* are a class of chemical found in many cosmetics. Apart from being a respiratory irritant, they are also endocrine disruptors. The still-developing reproductive system of the unborn fetus is especially vulnerable to disruption due to maternal use of these products.

### **Exposure and Vulnerability:**

- Like second-hand smoke, people can be exposed to these chemicals in the workplace, in public restrooms, stores, schools, and health care settings.
- Women may be more impacted by fragrance than men. They are more likely to be exposed to cleaning products, are more likely to suffer from fragrance contact allergy, and more frequently report adverse effects like headaches or breathing problems from exposure to fragrance products.

### **What Can We Do About This?**

Effective regulation of chemicals in consumer products is the best way to reduce dangerous exposures. PSR supports strengthening the Chemical Safety Improvement Act to truly protect the public from toxic chemicals. Testing of chemicals before they enter the marketplace, and adequate labeling of marketed products, are among the essential elements needed in the law.

We are all better off, as a society and as individuals, when our environment and our products support healthy development and good health.



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**A Fact Sheet by Physicians for Social Responsibility**  
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