

SCENTS

Background:

When we talk about scents, we mean fragrances, aromas or perfumes – anything that adds a smell to something else. Scents can usually be found in personal care products, such as perfumes, aftershaves, colognes, shampoos and conditioners, soaps, body lotions and deodorants. Scents are also found in household items, such as air fresheners, deodorizers, candles, some laundry detergents, fabric softeners and cleaning products.

Ingredients in scents:

Scents are usually made from a mixture of natural and man-made chemicals. A typical fragrance can contain between 100 to 350 ingredients. The problem with scented products is not so much the smell itself as the chemicals that produce the smell.

Scented products can contain several toxic chemicals that constantly turn into vapor in the air and attach themselves to hair, clothing, and surroundings. Most (95%) of the chemicals used are synthetic compounds made from petroleum. These include chemicals made from benzene, aldehydes and many other known toxins and sensitizers.¹

One commonly used chemical is diethyl phthalate, which is used to make scents last longer. It can cause allergic skin reactions (contact dermatitis) and is classified as a skin sensitizer and a reproductive toxin, according to HAZ-Map: Occupational Exposure of Hazardous Substances of the National Library of Medicine of the United States.²

Even products labeled "unscented" or "fragrance-free" may actually contain fragrances used to mask the smell of certain ingredients. Health Canada has specific rules about how companies can use these words on their labels. According to Health Canada's labeling regulations, "fragrance free" or "unscented" means that there have been no fragrances added to the cosmetic product, **or** that a masking agent has been added in order to hide the scents from the other ingredients in the cosmetic.

Health effects of scents:

Chemicals used to add scents to products can cause serious health problems for some people, especially for people with respiratory diseases such as asthma. Being near a scented product can make some people sick. Young children are especially vulnerable because of their developing systems and their size.

Scents enter our bodies through our skin and our lungs. The chemicals in scents can cause many different reactions. Even products containing natural plant extracts can cause allergic reactions in some people.

While some people are only mildly affected by scents, others have severe reactions. Some common symptoms include:

- headaches
- feeling dizzy
- feeling tired or weak
- shortness of breath
- nausea
- cold-like symptoms such as a stuffy nose
- worsening asthma symptoms¹

What you can do:

- Use gentler cleaning products on windows, walls, and floors where sanitizers are not required by the Department of Health. For a list of less toxic cleaning products or recipes on how to make your own, visit The Guide to Less Toxic Products. This online guide to less toxic personal care, cleaning and other products has been created by the Environmental Health Association of Nova Scotia, an independent, non-profit organization.
- Use scent-free personal care products. To find safer personal care products, visit the Skin Deep Database, a site that assesses and compares the safety of many brands of shampoos, skin creams, baby wipes, etc. Skin Deep is run by the Environmental Working Group, an American non-profit research organization. The Guide to Less Toxic Products also offers recommendations on personal and baby care products.
- Use non-scented laundry detergent and soap.
- Keep your facility well ventilated. If you don't have an air exchange system, open a window to get fresh air in and stale air out. Or put a fan in a window drawing air out and open another window to increase air circulation.
- If a scent-free policy is not in place, work with your staff to adopt one. For more information on how to create and implement a scent-free policy visit: "Developing a Scent-free Policy for the Workplace" at www.nb.lung.ca .
- Post Scent Free Child Care Centre signs (example in binder) to remind parents and staff to go scent-free.
- Respect the scent-free policies at other public areas such as schools, libraries, places of worship, gyms or recreational centres.

If you chose to wear perfumes for socializing:

- Don't keep perfumes or scented products in your bedroom.
- Wear a lighter fragrance (or no fragrance at all), during warm weather. Fragrance intensifies with heat.
- Make sure you wear a reasonable amount of fragrance. No one more than an arm's length away from you should be able to smell your fragrance.

References:

1. Neurotoxins at Home and in the Workplace: Report to the Committee on Science and Technology: U.S. House of Representatives, 99th Cong., 2nd session, RC347.5.N489 (1989).
2. "Diethyl phthalate" entry in HazMap: Occupational Exposure to Hazardous Agents. http://hazmap.nlm.nih.gov/cgi-bin/hazmap_generic?tbl=TblAgents&id=457 . Accessed November 27, 2007.

Resources:

The New Brunswick Lung Association four-part downloadable video on scents and "Developing a Scent-Free Policy for the Workplace": www.nb.lung.ca .

Guide to Less Toxic Products: www.lesstoxicguide.ca

Skin Deep Database: <http://www.cosmeticsdatabase.com>