

Health Care Without Harm

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Government Panel Expresses “Serious Concern” That Toxic Chemical in Vinyl Medical Products May Harm Sick Infants

The Risks Are Unnecessary and Preventable, Says Health Care Without Harm

(Arlington, VA) Today a government panel expressed “serious concern” that a chemical in vinyl medical products may harm reproductive organs of critically ill male infants exposed during medical treatments. The panel of expert scientists also agreed that they have “concern” that the development of the reproductive system of healthy male infants and toddlers could have been harmed by DEHP exposure during their mother’s pregnancy or from non-medical exposures during the first years of life. The panel’s findings confirm the report released yesterday by Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) which shows that fetuses, premature infants (“preemies”) and newborns are exposed to large amounts of a chemical suspected to cause reproductive and developmental problems in humans.

The chemical is DEHP (di-ethylhexyl phthalate) and it is used to make polyvinyl chloride (PVC or vinyl) medical products soft and flexible. In addition to use in the manufacture of medical products, the chemical is used in other vinyl products; including floorings, wall coverings, furniture, luggage and children's toys. The threat of exposure is high from some medical procedures because DEHP leaches from vinyl medical products because it is not chemically bonded to the plastic.

HCWH’s report focuses on critically ill infants as the most threatened population because multiple medical interventions may require using devices that have been shown to leach DEHP. Higher exposure for sick infants comes from neonatal intensive care units filled with vinyl products. Blood bags, respiratory masks, oxygen tubing, IV bags and tubing, feeding bags and tubing, mattress covers, examination gloves, and patient identification bracelets are among the many products commonly manufactured that use DEHP to soften the vinyl.

"These babies are exposed to DEHP from multiple pieces of equipment. It is entering their bodies through their mouths, through their veins and through their lungs," said Ted Schettler, MD, Science Director of the Science and Environmental Health Network. "No one knows exactly what impact these multiple exposures will have, but what we know about DEHP's effects on animals gives us cause for concern and for action."

Animal studies have shown DEHP to be of particular harm to the developing fetus and reproductive system. Exposure to DEHP can cause reproductive problems, including

- structural changes in the testes,
- reduced fertility,
- changes in sperm production,
- ovarian dysfunction, and

- decreased hormone production in females.

Malformations of the skeleton and heart, developmental delays and fetal death have also been found in animals exposed to DEHP.

DEHP exposure begins at conception and continues even after the infant leaves the hospital. A fetus can be exposed because DEHP can cross the placental barrier. Food, water, medical procedures or indoor air from vinyl floors, wall coverings or furniture are all potential sources of DEHP exposure for a pregnant woman. These same sources, as well as breast milk, baby formula, baby food and the mouthing of objects containing DEHP result in continued exposure to the chemical at home; which can be minimized by avoiding the use of PVC wherever possible.

Hospitals can avoid much of the exposure preemies and newborns receive from DEHP by using products made without the chemical when available. Alternatives are readily available for most products used in neonatal intensive care units, as well as for other PVC products

"Here is a government-sponsored panel of eminent scientists saying that phthalate plasticizers in PVC medical products may pose a threat to the ability to bear healthy children. Now health care professionals and patients need to insist that if we can make the same products out of materials that do not threaten fertility, we should do it," said Charlotte Brody, RN, co-coordinator of Health Care Without Harm.

HCWH is an international coalition of 280 organizations in 25 countries working to transform the health care industry so it is no longer a source of environmental harm. To learn more about HCWH or to obtain a copy of the report, *Neonatal Exposure to DEHP (di-2-ethylhexyl-phthalate) and Opportunities for Prevention*, visit www.noharm.org and click on "Breaking News."