



Dear EarthTalk: We often see and read reports about environmental threats to women's health, but aren't there also concerns about which men should be especially vigilant?

-- Jay Walsh, Boston, MA

Indeed, women aren't the only ones who should be worried about environmental threats. A recently released report ("Men's Health: What You Don't Know Might Hurt You") by the non-profit Environmental Working Group (EWG) concludes that environmental exposures may have major negative impacts on men's health as well, and outlines ways that guys can avoid some of the major risks.

"Most men understand that smart lifestyle choices—such as exercising regularly, eating a healthful diet and not smoking—make a big difference in staying healthy," says EWG researcher and report author Paul Pestano. "However, what many men might not know is that research in the last few decades has shown that environmental exposures may contribute to major diseases and health concerns that especially affect men, including heart disease, prostate cancer and infertility." He adds that toxic substances in drinking water, food, food packaging and personal care products have all been linked to serious health problems that affect millions of American men.

According to EWG, men's heart disease risks are exacerbated by exposure to mercury in certain seafoods, Teflon chemicals in non-stick cookware, and bisphenol-A (BPA) in hard plastic containers and canned foods. Additionally, arsenic and lead in drinking water supplies is a contributing factor in elevated heart disease risks for men. Meanwhile, certain agricultural pesticides common on fruits and vegetables as well as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) that build up in meat and dairy products have been associated with prostate cancer, the second most common cause of cancer for American men. And exposures to lead, pesticides and chemicals in personal care products contribute to low sperm counts, infertility and other reproductive issues for men. EWG also underscores the importance of limiting sun exposure, as men face a higher risk of developing melanoma than women.

"While genetics can predetermine certain health outcomes, there are a number of ways men can dramatically reduce their potentially harmful environmental exposures," Pestano says. Some tips include:

Men's health and the environment

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- investing in a water filter system specifically designed to reduce exposure to lead, arsenic and other drinking water contaminants (see EWG's "Water Filter Buying Guide" to find the right one);
- avoiding canned foods and plastic containers with the recycling code #7 to limit BPA exposure;
- using personal care products that don't contain phthalates, parabens or other potential contaminants (see EWG's "Skin Deep" database that lists toxic chemicals in some 69,000 personal care products);
- choosing conventionally grown fruits and vegetables that have the fewest pesticide residues and buying the organic versions of certain types of produce that otherwise rely heavily on chemicals (EWG's "Dirty Dozen" guide lists apples, grapes, strawberries, celery, peaches, spinach and sweet bell peppers as the worst offenders among others); and
- using proper sun cover and getting regular skin checks with a dermatologist to reduce melanoma risks.

By following these guidelines along with eating a healthy, varied diet and getting regular exercise, men can significantly reduce their health risks and potentially add years to their lives.

CONTACT: Environmental Working Group, www.ewg.org/research/mens-health .

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