



A 2009 study sponsored by the Environmental Working Group and Rachel's Network found traces of 232 synthetic chemicals in umbilical cord blood samples from 10 different babies of African American, Asian and Hispanic descent born in 2009 in different parts of the U.S.

Dear EarthTalk: A few years back a study found over 200 chemicals in the umbilical cords of newborns, particularly African American, Asian and Hispanic babies. What are the causes of this phenomenon and what can be done about it? □□□ □□□ □□□ □□□ -- Bettina Olsen, New York, NY The study referenced found traces of some 232 synthetic chemicals in cord blood samples from 10 different babies of African American, Asian and Hispanic descent born in 2009 in different parts of the U.S. Study sponsors Environmental Working Group (EWG) and Rachel's Network were looking to find out if the hormone-disrupting chemical Bisphenol A (BPA), a plasticizer widely used in food and drink storage containers, is present in the cord blood of minority babies in the U.S. Sadly and not surprisingly, BPA turned up in nine of the 10 cord blood samples tested. But perhaps even worse is the study's detection of whole new raft of chemicals showing up in babies' cord blood for the first time. Some of these newer offenders include tetrabromobisphenol A (TBBPA) from computer circuit boards, synthetic fragrances used in common cosmetics and detergents and Teflon-relative perfluorobutanoic acid.

The 2009 study was a follow-up to an earlier analysis of chemicals in cord blood in the mainstream U.S. population during 2004 births. That earlier study found some 287 different industrial chemicals and pollutants in babies' cord blood, although BPA was not yet on EWG's watch list at the time. The more recent study focused on minority babies because minority communities in the U.S. tend to bear a disproportionate pollution burden given their closer proximity to busy roads, industrial sites and older housing. But EWG points out that they tested for chemicals that are likely found in virtually every American household, so none of us are

EarthTalk®: Chemicals in umbilical cord blood

Written by By E - The Environmental Magazine
Friday, 01 June 2012 00:00

immune to exposure. EWG hopes that by continuing to monitor the chemicals we are born with it can hold corporate polluters' and government regulators' feet to the fire in regard to waste outputs and pollution mitigation.

EWG did not look for chemicals associated with smoking or alcohol consumption on the part of mothers, instead focusing on contaminants from exposures to consumer products and commercial chemicals omnipresent on supermarket shelves. To EWG, the presence of these chemicals in umbilical cord blood represents "a significant failure on the part of the Congress and government agencies" charged with protecting human health. "Our results strongly suggest that the health of all children is threatened by trace amounts of hundreds of synthetic chemicals coursing through their bodies from the earliest stages of life."

Part of the problem is outdated laws governing the handling and use of toxic chemicals. Currently 1976's Toxic Substances Control Act is the law of the land in regard to controlling the distribution, use and disposal of toxic chemicals nationwide. But EWG and other groups complain that hundreds of thousands of new chemical formulations are unleashed on an unwitting public every year via America's store shelves because the federal government assumes new products and ingredients to be innocent until proven guilty. These critics would like to see the federal government take a more proactive role in approving new substances for use in consumer products, not to mention residential and workplace environments.

On the legislative front, green groups are pinning their hopes for a reformed Toxic Substances Control Act on New Jersey Democratic Senator Frank Lautenberg's Safe Chemicals Act (S. 847), introduced last fall. The bill is currently spinning its wheels in committee hearings, but its 17 bi-partisan co-sponsors are optimistic that it will come up for a floor vote before the 112th Congress wraps up the end of this year.

CONTACT: EWG's "Pollution in Minority Newborns," www.ewg.org/minoritycordblood.

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