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Pollution at Home Lurks Unrecognized, Instead Attributed to Large-scale Environmental Disasters

Many surprised to learn extent of in-home contamination from consumer products that go unstudied, untested

WASHINGTON, DC – Although Americans are becoming increasingly aware of toxic chemical exposure from everyday household products like bisphenol A in some baby bottles and lead in some toys, women do not readily connect typical household products with personal chemical exposure and related adverse health effects, according to research from the December issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

“People more readily equate pollution with large-scale contamination and environmental disasters, yet the products and activities that form the backdrop to our everyday lives—electronics, cleaners, beauty products, food packaging—are a significant source of daily personal chemical exposure that accumulates over time,” said sociologist Rebecca Gasior Altman, the lead author of the study, “Pollution Comes Home and Gets Personal: Women’s Experience of Household Chemical Exposure.”

Altman and her team examined how women interpreted and reacted to information about chemical contamination in their homes and bodies. After reviewing their personal chemical exposure data, most women were surprised and puzzled at the number of contaminants detected. They initially had difficulty relating the chemical results for their homes, located in rural and suburban communities, with their images of environmental problems, which they associated with toxic contamination originating outside the home from military or industrial activities, accidents or dumping.

“This research illustrates how science is beginning to play a paramount role in discovering and redefining environmental problems that are not immediately perceptible through direct experience,” Altman said. “Pollution at home has been a blind spot for society. The study documents that an important shift occurs in how people understand environmental pollution, its sources and possible solutions as they learn about chemicals from everyday products that are detectable in urine samples and the household dust collecting under the sofa.”

Though some scientists and government officials worry such information will provoke fears, instead the interdisciplinary team discovered that people who learned about chemicals in their homes and bodies were not alarmed, but eager for more, not less, information about how typical household products can expose them to chemicals that may affect health.

The researchers interviewed 25 women, all of whom had participated in an earlier study, the Silent Spring Institute’s Household Exposure Study (HES), which tested for 89 environmental pollutants in air, dust and urine samples from 120 Cape Cod households. The study found about 20 target chemicals per home on average, including pesticides and compounds from plastics,

cleaners, furniture, cosmetics and other products. Nearly all participants in the HES chose to learn their personal results, and the 25 selected for the current research were interviewed about their experiences learning the results for their home and the study as a whole.

This new study is among the first to apply the tools and perspectives of sociology to biomonitoring and exposure assessment research, and is the first to investigate the experience of personal results-reporting in a study of a wide range of contaminants. The Household Exposure Study has set an example that is shifting scientific practice, as it is among the first to adopt a right-to-know framework for reporting all results to interested participants.

This study was co-authored by Rachel Morello-Frosch, epidemiologist and environmental health scientist at the University of California-Berkeley; Julia Green Brody and Ruthann Rudel, environmental health scientists at Silent Spring Institute; Phil Brown, sociologist at Brown University; and Mara Averick, an undergraduate research assistant from Brown University.

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The article is available to members of the media in advance of publication on an embargoed basis. Contact Jackie Cooper, media relations officer at the American Sociological Association, at jcooper@asanet.org or (202) 247-9871, to request the article or author interviews.

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The *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* is a quarterly journal of the American Sociological Association.

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