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The Scent of Danger

Manufacturers use fragrance to sell, but it can hurt your health.

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Your faculty of smell is probably your most underrated sense. You can detect at least 1 trillion distinct scents. Your memories and emotions linked to smells can be stronger than those associated with sight or sound.

Manufacturers have tapped into this powerful emotional consumer response, adding artificial scents to many household products. And this has brought about some serious health concerns.

A Fragrance by Any Other Name

In the commercial industry, a fragrance is anything that adds a smell to something else. Manufacturers of products like shampoos, air fresheners, house cleaners, candles and dryer sheets re-create inviting scents in products. Some grocery stores artificially pump in aromas of chocolate and baked bread; car dealerships spray artificial “new car smell” inside vehicles; perfume manufacturers create “scent logos” to elevate a brand’s appeal. A study by Nike showed that adding scents to their stores increased intent to purchase by 80 percent.

The public generally perceives scented products as pleasant and harmless. But these fragrances often contain chemicals that can be dangerous when inhaled or touches the skin. Many are listed on the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Hazardous Waste List. They include numerous carcinogens, neurotoxins, respiratory irritants, solvents, aldehydes, petrochemicals, phthalates, narcotics and more (Connie Pitts, *Get a Whiff of This*).

There are many clinical accounts of fragranced products causing, triggering and exacerbating an increasing number of health conditions. People with multiple chemical sensitivities experience excessive reactivity to a wide range of chemicals and can develop dysfunction in organ systems that baffle physicians.

It increasingly appears that chemical sensitivity comes from the body’s detoxification systems suffering from accumulated chemical exposure. This can result in strange forms of cancer, neurological, autoimmune or genetic disorders, and a widening array of allergies, says the Arizona Center for Advanced Medicine.

Consider this stunning fact: When you see the word “fragrance” on the label of a product, that scent will typically contain a blend of *100 to 350 ingredients*. About 5,000 fragrance ingredients are used in heavy rotation, and the Food and Drug Administration gives them a free pass from being revealed to consumers, even when products have caused serious health problems.

But the fragrance industry is facing a real problem: About 30 percent of U.S. citizens (98 million people) now exhibit serious symptoms to the toxic chemicals in their products, according to the *Journal of Environmental Health*. Some experts believe chemical fragrances may be causing many modern diseases. This concern is slowly seeping into public consciousness as the new “second-hand smoke.”

Hazardous Household Products

If you have not given this subject much thought, you should start examining some of the products you use.

The EPA reveals that potent carcinogens are present in your fabric softeners and dryer sheets. Benzyl acetate is linked to pancreatic cancer; limonene is a known lung irritant; dichlorobenzene, a carcinogenic solvent, causes respiratory distress and heart attacks. Fabric softeners and dryer sheets are specifically designed to transfer their scent onto clothing, which means these chemicals stay close to your body.

Laundry detergent is no better. It may contain nonylphenol, shown in studies to cause reproductive and developmental problems. The carcinogen formaldehyde has also been added to fragrance formulas, as have phthalates, causing hormone disruptions, cancer, birth defects and fertility problems, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Everyone has favorite hair products, but shampoos and moisturizers may contain paraben preservatives that tamper with hormone function, perfumes that cause allergic reactions, and even lead, which can lead to cancer.

Air fresheners also poison the very air you're trying to enliven. The Environmental Working Group says they include the known carcinogen 1,4-Dichlorobenzene, a dangerous chemical found in the blood of 96 percent of Americans, as well as other volatile organic compounds that can cause headaches, breathing difficulties, depression, irregular heartbeats and other health challenges.

Do you want to create some ambiance with scented candles? Many of these contain acetone, benzene, lead, carbon monoxide, toluene and more. The lead comes from metal wicks that release particles, and these have been found in the human brain where they are associated with Alzheimer's Disease, as well as birth defects in babies, according to National Air Quality Testing Services.

Go Fragrance Free

Chemical fragrances are invisible and often pleasant, but most are deceitfully dangerous. Look for products that are free of fragrances. Check ingredient lists. Avoid any product with one of these as an ingredient: fragrance, parfum, phthalate, DEP, DBP, DEHP, limonene or linalool. And note: Some products labeled "fragrance free" still contain fragrance ingredients to mask unpleasant chemical smells.

If you want a scented product, look for one that uses essential oils instead of chemical artificial fragrance. You can use essential oils (in a diffuser) as an excellent, safe way to freshen up a room, and you can dab a drop or two of essential oil onto a washcloth and put it in the dryer with your laundry to freshen your clothes.

For a list of safer cleaning products and recipes for making your own, visit LessToxicGuide.ca. You can also search the Skin Deep database at ewg.org/skindeep, a comprehensive list of safe products for cleaning and personal care.■