



About Kathleen Schuler

Kathleen Schuler is a Senior Policy Analyst with the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy and is a contributing author of *The Health Case for Reforming the Toxic Substances Control Act*.

About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota with offices in Washington D.C. and Geneva.

Toxic chemicals are costing us—and we're paying with our health

MINNEAPOLIS, FEBRUARY 22, 2010 — Let's face it: The current system for overseeing chemicals used in consumer products is broken.

Last year, Congress banned lead in children's products. But recently, we learned that some manufacturers who phased lead out of children's jewelry are using cadmium—another brain toxin that's a carcinogen to boot. How can we prevent the next chemical crisis from threatening our health and contributing to rising health costs?

When Congress enacted the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) in 1976 to protect us from toxic chemicals, it grandfathered in some 60,000 chemicals with no testing requirements. Another 20,000 chemicals were added to this list over the next three decades. Yet the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has required testing on only 200 chemicals. The EPA's hands are so tied it didn't even have authority to ban asbestos, an established carcinogen already banned in 40 countries.

A recent report by some of the nation's leading public health professionals describes the toll that toxic chemicals are taking on our health and our budget. This report, called *The Health Case for Reforming the Toxic Substances Control Act*, summarizes the insidious contribution of environmental toxins to an array of chronic health problems.

For example, childhood cancers have increased by more than 20 percent since 1975. A woman's lifetime risk of breast cancer is now one in eight, up from one in ten in 1973. Chemicals in common products like baby bottles and "sippy" cups have bisphenol A, a hormone disruptor linked to cancer. Composite wood used to make many things around the house often contains formaldehyde, a known cancer-causing toxin.

And, there's more than cancer to worry about. Learning and developmental disabilities now affect one in six children. Since the early 1990s, reported cases of autism spectrum disorders have increased tenfold. Children and pregnant women are routinely exposed to chemicals known to be developmental toxins, including methylmercury, brominated flame retardants, dioxins, arsenic and many more. Children's toys and

jewelry have been found to be contaminated with lead and cadmium, both neurotoxins. More than 100 chemicals that adversely affect the brain and nervous system have also been implicated as playing a role in the development of neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

Sound science links toxic chemicals to health problems and enormous health care costs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that chronic diseases affect 133 million Americans and account for 75 percent of health care costs. Some portion of these costs can be attributed to toxic chemical exposure. We could achieve significant savings in the health care system through better regulation of industrial chemicals. The Health Case report estimates that a 0.1 percent decrease in the incidence of chronic diseases would reduce direct U.S. health care expenditures by \$5 billion per year by 2020. Numerous peer-reviewed studies estimate savings at much higher rates, for example: 5 percent of childhood cancer, 10 percent of neurodevelopmental deficits and 30 percent of childhood asthma. And remember, every one of those statistics represents someone's children.

We must reform the outdated and ineffective Toxic Substances Control Act to protect the most vulnerable, especially children and pregnant women; phase out the worst chemicals; and require basic safety data for all chemicals before they are put into products. Our consumer products like household cleaners, cadmium-laden children's toys or electronics with toxic flame retardants will continue to be packed with harmful chemicals. In the coming months, Congress is expected to consider new legislation to bring the outdated toxics law into the 21st century.

We can stop the toxic-chemical-of-the-month cycle and cut health costs. Thirty years of broken chemical policy is enough.