EPA report details how toxics harm kids' health
Additional risks to California children are listed

Jane Kay, Chronicle Environment Writer

A new federal report on children's exposure to environmental contaminants blames air pollutants, mercury, lead, pesticides and solvents for damaging health and causing birth defects.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency warned that chemicals in the environment are implicated in asthma, acute bronchitis and upper-respiratory infections, cancer, mental retardation and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

While the report, "America's Children and the Environment," doesn't present new single findings, it summarizes individual studies linking toxicants to illness, said Amy D. Kyle, an author and research scientist at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health.

"This focus on children is quite new. We're just getting a better understanding that the environment is important in terms of childhood cancer, birth defects and exposures that affect the nervous system," Kyle said.

"Only in the last five years are scientists recognizing that children are an especially sensitive group . . . that we understand the effects of mercury in children in utero at very low levels, and in the last 10 years that air pollution is killing people," Kyle said.

The data were drawn from thousands of studies as well as a newly compiled report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that presents levels of 116 environmental contaminants in human bodies.

Some of the findings are as follows:

-- About 8 percent -- or 5 million -- women of childbearing age have mercury concentrations greater than a maximum precautionary level. Children born to those women are at increased risk of cognitive and developmental damage. Mercury in fish is the biggest source of exposure, and coal burning is the
biggest source of mercury, the report said.

-- Pesticides, other chemicals and radiation may contribute to an increased frequency of some childhood cancers. Children born to parents who work with or use certain chemicals are more likely to have cancer in childhood.

-- For children with respiratory problems, exposure to air pollution can lead to difficulty in breathing and increased use of medication, visits to doctors' offices, trips to outpatient emergency rooms or hospitals.

EPA Administrator Christie Whitman said the agency will use the data to help identify and track environmental contaminants and evaluate their impact on children's health.

Ultimately, she said, the agency will work to minimize exposures, and the EPA cites as an example a Bush administration air pollution plan aimed at cutting mercury emissions by 70 percent by 2018, the EPA said.

But Democratic lawmakers and environmental groups wasted no time in criticizing the EPA for holding up the release of the report, which was completed in July.

California Sen. Barbara Boxer accused officials of the agency of releasing the study only after reading a newspaper article on Friday based on a partial draft of the report.

Boxer, a Democrat, also said the EPA's report puts the Bush administration on notice that it must more rigorously act against clean-air violations and support a strong Superfund program requiring major polluters to pay for cleanups.

Nearly 1 million children live within one mile of a contaminated Superfund site, she said.

She also pointed out that at the same time the administration refused to take a tough stand on air toxics, the report found that a child's risk of getting cancer is greater than one in 100,000 from exposure to hazardous air pollutants.

But EPA defended the timing on the release of the report.

"It takes time to deal with lots of people and lots of agencies," said Tracey J. Woodruff, an author and an environmental scientist in the EPA's San Francisco office. "We did a thorough interagency review."
The report, she said, was scrutinized by scientists outside the agency before being turned over to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the Office of Management and Budget. The EPA responded to comments from about a dozen agencies, Woodruff said.

At this time, it's unclear what changes have been made to the original report completed by the agency eight months ago.

In this report, scientists say research suggests that in California birth defects could be linked to other environmental contaminants in addition to the known toxicants mercury and PCBs.

Studies also found an increased risk for heart and oral cleft defects among the California children of women exposed at work to chlorinated solvents.

Also, studies from this state found that the children of women and men who work with pesticides and wood preservatives are at higher risk for dying young or having birth defects.

Nationally, lead, one of the worst environmental hazards, continues to plague children despite drops in blood levels, the report said.

Exposures occur from ingesting dust and soil contaminated mainly by deteriorated lead paint and old emissions from leaded gas. Some children still ingest paint chips, and get lead from drinking water, soil and dust, canned food and drink, lead-glazed ceramics and factory emissions.

Exposure impairs intelligence and cognitive development, and can lead to attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. It also increases the likelihood that children will drop out of school, and it increases the risk of anti-social and delinquent behavior, the report said.

E-mail Jane Kay at jkay@sfchronicle.com.

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