

From coast to coast, the plastics industry has more women workers than in any other manufacturing sector. In the Windsor-Essex County area, women make up the majority of the plastics workforce.

You, like all women* in the plastics industry, are likely working with toxic chemicals that have been linked with increases in breast cancer and reproductive problems. Understanding the dangers of exposure to these substances and what you and your employer can do to prevent them is the first step towards ensuring your well-being and a cleaner and healthier workplace.

*Men can develop breast cancer and other health problems from these exposures as well.

Plastics & You

Many of the substances that you may be exposed to in your workplace act like hormones and may increase your risk of developing cancer and reproductive problems. The combined effect of several chemicals is far greater than the individual effect of each single chemical.



According to the Transportation Energy Data Book, while cars in the 1950s contained almost no plastic, today's automobiles have more than 260 pounds (120 kilograms) of plastic on board.

Some Chemicals of Concern

The following is a list of some chemicals commonly found in the plastics industry which have been identified as having the potential to cause health damage to workers:

// ACRYLAMIDE // ACRYLONITRILE // BENZENE
// BENZOPYRENE // BISPHENOL A // BUTADIENE
// CARBON TETRACHLORIDE // FORMALDEHYDE
// POLYBROMINATED BIPHENOLS // PHTHALATES
// POLYCYCLIC AROMATIC CARBONS // STYRENE
// HEAVY METALS // SOLVENTS

These chemicals can be found in many of the plastics used to make vehicle fenders, doors, seat cushions, arm rests, floor coverings, instrument panels, interior and exterior trims, steering wheels, and more. They can also be found in such parts as plastic oil pans and intake manifolds. The heating, grinding and mixing of plastics can release chemicals into the work environment where they can make their way into workers' bodies.

CONTACT

**The National Network on Environments
and Women's Health**

www.nnewh.org

Canadian Women's Health Network

www.cwhn.ca

More detailed information about the material in this pamphlet can be found in a review of the literature at:
www.nnewh.org/images/upload/attach/5767New%20Solutions%20Article.pdf

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What can be done?

Despite the health and safety issues of working in the plastics industry, it is important to know that there are ways of eliminating or reducing exposures. Plastics manufacturing companies should replace dangerous chemicals with safer ones. Each machine should be locally ventilated to prevent the release of chemicals into the workplace air. The ventilation system should be fitted with scrubbers to protect the outside environment. Wet methods should be used to control dust during grinding, drilling and sanding processes.

Air monitoring is important but it can only help so much. This is the most common way that chemical exposure levels are measured in the workplace, but it does not calculate the actual effect that chemical exposures can have on your body. Another problem is that the current occupational exposure limits (OELs) permitted under the law are not protective enough.

Health and Safety Laws

Provincial occupational health and safety laws require the government and employers to protect workers' health. An employer who fails to provide a healthy work environment can be penalized.

These laws also give workers the right to refuse work they believe to be unsafe without fear of harassment. Your union or a workers' health and safety agency can advise you about the proper way to exercise this right. The laws also require that the employer provide adequate education about the substances used in your workplace. You have, for example, the right to see Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for any substance used at work. Again, your union or a health and safety agency can help you to understand the information in a MSDS.

If you are in a unionized workplace you likely have clauses in your collective agreement that give you additional protection. It is essential that you demand your legal and contractual rights be respected if you are to reduce your chances of developing health problems. Your union health and safety representatives are there to assist you.

WOMEN & THE AUTOMOBILE PLASTIC INDUSTRY

a quick-facts guide to protecting your health

