



Let's Talk Prevention: Reducing Toxic Exposures

Questions to Ask Patients

The Institute of Medicine notes three levels sectors of a patient's environment: home, community, and workplace. It can be helpful to address the three sectors separately to identify potential environmental hazards in each sector of the patient's environment. If hazards are identified during the initial assessment, additional information can be gathered with questions tailored to each patient's environmental history. In general, health professionals should ask questions about the frequency and duration of exposures and provide suggestions for safer alternatives and healthier practices (when possible).

HOME

Do you use pesticides or bug spray inside/outside your home or on your pets? Do you use weed killers or other lawn care products?

- Suggest investigating safer alternatives and choosing natural remedies for pest management and lawn care when available.

How often do you have your clothes dry cleaned?

- Suggest minimizing frequency, choosing eco-friendly dry cleaning facilities free of perchlorate, or PERC. If possible, air out dry cleaned clothes before bringing them inside to let chemicals off-gas.

If patients seem to be having a difficult time estimating you can provide them with some of the following choices:

- *More than once a month?*
- *More than once a week?*
- *More than once a day?*

Do you use strong cleaning products inside your home? How often?

- Suggest switching to a natural cleaning method or product and/or using cleaning products in well ventilated areas (open a window) and washing hands thoroughly after each use.

Do you live in a home built before 1978? Have you recently renovated any part of your home or are you planning to do so?

- Determine possible exposure to lead paint or other harmful chemicals which may be released into the air as dust particles during construction. Suggest ventilation or possible vacating the premises temporarily if there is high risk or potential for exposure of pregnant women and children.

How often do you eat canned/processed foods? Do you purchase organic or nonorganic produce?

- Frequently consuming canned and highly processed foods can increase exposure to food additives such as Bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates. Suggest minimizing these foods and choosing fresh or frozen produce where possible. Studies indicate that leafy greens,

berries, and apples have some of the highest pesticide residues. A rule of thumb for produce: if you don't consume the outside of the food, it is less important to buy organic.

Do you have any furniture in your home that is ripped or breaking down with foam showing?

- This could increase exposure to flame retardant chemicals added to upholstery. Suggest repairing or replacing ripped furniture.

Do you use air fresheners inside? How often?

- Air fresheners or other highly scented products can contain untested mixtures of synthetic fragrance compounds. Suggest safer alternatives to commercial air fresheners and opening windows periodically to improve ventilation.

How many cosmetics or personal care products do you use daily? Do you use skin lightening creams or hair straightening/relaxing treatments? How often?

- Skin lightening creams and hair straightening/relaxing treatments are some of the most toxic personal care products. Suggest investigating safer alternatives online at www.ewg.org/skindeep/.

Do you use plastic containers to reheat or cook food or beverages at home?

- Suggest choosing alternative methods for cooking and storing foods. Try to use glass, stainless steel, or ceramic containers instead of plastic.

Do you visit hair or nail salons? How often? Do you paint your nails at home?

- Suggest minimizing exposure by choosing well ventilated areas or facilities.

COMMUNITY

Do you have any concerns about toxic or hazardous facilities in your neighborhood or community?

- Asking this question directly could bring up concerns which may not have otherwise been voiced during the visit.

Does your home get water from a private or well water source?

- Private wells should be tested periodically to ensure the water is within existing health and safety guidelines.

Do you know of any pesticide or herbicide spraying in your community?

- Suggest closing windows during spraying and avoid contact with sprayed areas.

Do you live in a high traffic neighborhood?

- Suggest closing windows during high traffic times and avoid walking outdoors during rush hour to minimize exposure to car exhaust.

WORKPLACE

What do you do for work?

- Certain occupations involve an increased risk of chemical exposures. For example, pesticide or herbicide application or manufacturing, dry cleaning, nail technicians (or other salon workers), printing (exposure to inks and solvents). This is not a complete list.

Do you come into contact with any chemicals or biological agents at work? Do you wear any protective gear or clothing?

- Where applicable it may be appropriate to suggest wearing gloves or a face mask to reduce exposures.

Repeat work-related questions to determine potential exposures for other family members in the household. Chemical agents can be brought into the home from workplaces or other locations on shoes or clothing.