



Environmental Health and You

Our Environment determines so much in our everyday lives and existence, whether it's our personal or ambient surroundings. One big determinate of it's ever changing state is our health; hence the concept of Environmental Health comes into focus. Environmental Health according to the World Health Organization places focus on all physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours. It further deals with assessing and controlling these factors in the Environment which can potentially affect our health.

When assessing our health and the environment it's important to remember that our environment is either personal or ambient. Our personal environment refers to our immediate surroundings or basically that which and where we can control e.g. smoking, our diet, sexual behavior or alcohol consumption in our homes or office etc.

Ambient environment on the other hand, speaks to which and where we have little to no control e.g. food additives, pollution and industrial products. By being able to distinguish between the personal and ambient environment, only then can we prevent and control the potential threats of our surroundings on our health.



The state of our health is dependent on our environmental risk and exposure, like maintaining a safe supply of food and water, disposal of our waste, control workplace hazards and reducing air, water and noise pollution. But how can this be done? It is made easier by good environmental management. Environmental exposure causes hundreds of thousands of illnesses each year. In our homes we can start by assessing the basic chemicals used for cleaning. Each year we spend millions of dollars on products to keep our homes sparkling clean. Cleaning is supposed to be about maintaining a healthy home, yet some common household cleaning products contain chemicals that can harm human health and the environment. That is why it is important to follow label instructions and pay attention to warning symbols to prevent harmful exposure.

Not adhering to directions and correct usage of common household chemicals like bleach and other washing detergents can cause serious and sometimes life threatening risk. Misuse or overuse of common household chemical like bleach and other disinfectants can cause irritation to the skin and eyes due to active ingredients like hypochlorite, ammonia and hydrogen peroxide found in these chemical. Even though some of these might be in small quantities, they can accumulate over time to

reach dangerous levels. When we use aerosols e.g. air fresheners and insect repellents, chemicals linger and we can inhale them or they can enter our bodies through our skin or be ingested as a residue left on dishes. Research has shown that some aerosols can contain VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) like benzene, formaldehyde and toluene to



name a few which are carcinogenic and have possible links to different cancers. These VOC's are not just limited to aerosols but to paints, glues and even carpeting. They not only affect humans but our pets as well. Products which are flushed down the drain can have a serious impact on aquatic ecosystems affecting the ambient environment.

Your place of work is not exempted as it relates to issues of environmental health. Besides chemical and biological exposure, you may be exposed to many physical, social and behavioural determinants of health depending on the type of job you do. Take for example, your workstation if you are a clerical staff. Most of your duties are done at the work station using computers. Is your seating arrangement comfortable? Is your chair, desk and keyboard device proportionate to each other? Are you slumped over when doing you work? If your answer to any of these questions is yes, the probability to possible exposure and health risk exists. Ergonomics is the science of matching the job to the worker and the product to the user. The goal is to reduce stress and eliminate injuries and disorders associated with the overuse of muscles, bad posture, and repeated tasks. Failing to do so can expose workers to musculo-skeletal disorders (MSDs) which affect the muscles, nerves and tendons.



Work related MSDs (including those of the neck, upper extremities and lower back) are one of the leading causes of lost workday injury and illness. Workers in many different industries and occupations can be exposed to risk factors at work, such as lifting heavy items, bending, reaching overhead, pushing and pulling heavy loads, working in awkward body postures and performing the same or similar tasks repetitively. Exposure to these known risk factors for MSDs increases a worker's risk of injury (US Department of Labor 2011). Employers are responsible for providing a safe

and healthful workplace for their workers.

What can your Employer do?

Employers can take measures to reduce risks to workers in the workplace e.g.:

- Provide Management
- Involve Workers
- Provide Training
- Identify Problems
- Encourage Early Reporting of MSD Symptoms
- Implement Solutions to Control Hazards
- Evaluate Progress

