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Air Fresheners Can Make Mothers And Babies Ill

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Air fresheners and aerosols can make babies and their mothers ill, research from the University of Bristol's Children of the 90s study has revealed.

A number of previous studies have shown that air fresheners and aerosols are responsible for high levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in the home.

Children of the 90s (ALSPAC), which has followed the health and development of 14,000 children since before birth, is the first study to investigate the effects of VOCs on infants.

The researchers found that frequent use of air fresheners and aerosols during pregnancy and early childhood was associated with higher levels of diarrhoea, earache and other symptoms in infants, as well as headaches and depression in mothers.

32% more babies suffered diarrhoea in homes where air fresheners (including sticks, sprays and aerosols) were used every day, compared with homes where they were used once a week or less. They also suffered significantly more from earache. Daily use of aerosols such as polish, deodorant and hairspray was associated with a 30% increase in cases of diarrhoea and, to a lesser extent, an increase in vomiting.

Air fresheners and aerosols also affected mothers, with those who used them daily suffering nearly 10% more headaches.

The most surprising result is the link between maternal depression and air fresheners. 16% of mothers who used fresheners reported depression, compared with 12.7% of those who seldom used them. This represents an increased risk of over 26%.

The ALSPAC study monitored levels of VOCs in 170 randomly selected homes for a year to establish the household products most likely to raise levels of VOCs. In addition, over 10,000 mothers completed questionnaires about their use of these products. They also reported at various points during pregnancy and childhood on symptoms suffered by themselves and their

children.

The paper's lead author, Dr Alex Farrow of the Department of Health and Social Care at Brunel University, says: "Over 40% of families in the ALSPAC study reported using air fresheners regularly. People may think that using these products makes their homes cleaner and healthier, but being cleaner may not necessarily mean being healthier.

"Air fresheners combined with other aerosol and household products contribute to a complex mixture of chemicals and a build-up of VOCs in the home environment. Pregnant women and babies up to six months may be particularly susceptible to the effects of this, because they spend around 80% of their time at home. There may also be implications for other groups who are at home a good deal, such as old people.

"More research is needed, but in the meantime, it might be safer to limit use of air fresheners and aerosols in the home. Squeezing a lemon is just as effective at freshening the air."

Farrow A, Taylor H, Northstone K, Golding J, ALSPAC Study Team. Symptoms of Mothers and Infants Related to Total Volatile Organic Compounds in Household Products. Archives of Environmental Health.

NOTES

ALSPAC The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (also known as Children of the 90s) is a unique ongoing research project based in the University of Bristol. It enrolled 14,000 mothers during pregnancy in 1991-2 and has followed most of the children and parents in minute detail ever since.

For further information contact ALSPAC PR and Communications:
Nick Kerswell , Sally Watson or Anne Gorrington 0117 33 16731
MOBILE 07967 390808

See www.alspac.bristol.ac.uk