Protecting Children's Health

We all want our children to thrive and grow into a healthy and productive adult population. Since 1998, the NIEHS/EPA Children's Environmental Health and Disease Prevention Research Centers (Children's Centers) have studied individual, regional, national, and global environmental exposures and children's health. Contributions from this unique coordinated national network of research centers are leading to long-term economic and social benefits, along with improved health.

Advancing Research Through Collaboration and Training

The Children's Centers connect basic scientists, social scientists, pediatricians, public health professionals, and community organizations, all working together to improve the health and environments of children. To keep breakthrough discoveries coming and maintain a pipeline of experienced environmental health scientists, the Children's Centers are also dedicated to developing the next generation of researchers.

What We’ve Learned: A Good Start Lasts a Lifetime

Pound for pound, children have increased risks from environmental exposures, because their bodily systems — cardiovascular, digestive, immune, nervous, and others — are still developing. Environmental health researchers now recognize that low level exposures, especially during early developmental growth periods, such as in utero or neonatal, can have long-lasting effects. This research evolution demonstrates that environmental health effects are complex — not a simple relationship between a particular type and amount of exposure and disease. New science shows that combined chemical exposures affect growth and development in ways not previously recognized.

All Children's Centers produce important insights about children's health and social conditions. Examples provided represent some of the work but don’t tell the whole story. More information on the research and findings can be found on the EPA and NIEHS websites.

Pregnancy and Birth Outcomes

An adverse pregnancy outcome is an event that reduces the chance of having a healthy baby, such as miscarriage, preterm birth, or impaired fetal growth. Nearly a half million babies — one out of every nine — are born premature and too small, costing the U.S. health care system more than $26 billion a year.1

- Low birth weight in infants is linked to exposures to low-level arsenic during pregnancy.2

- Low thyroid-stimulating hormone levels during pregnancy, in both the mother and baby, are associated with exposure to polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs), commonly used as flame retardants.3 Thyroid hormones regulate metabolism, and are critical to normal development of the baby’s brain and nervous system.

Epidemiologic literature also suggests associations of prenatal exposures to heavy metals, including mercury, lead, and arsenic, with increased risk for brain damage, neurodevelopmental problems, congenital malformations, and miscarriage.

Children's Centers:

Previous and current institutions that have contributed to improving our understanding of children's environmental health through this include:

- Brown University
- Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center
- Columbia University
- Dartmouth College
- Duke University
- Harvard University
- Johns Hopkins University
- Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai
- National Jewish Health
- University of California, Berkeley
- University of California, Davis
- University of California, San Francisco
- University of Illinois
- University of Iowa
- University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey
- University of Michigan
- University of Southern California
- University of Washington
Neurodevelopmental and Neurobehavioral Disorders

Over the last 12 years, the prevalence of all developmental disabilities increased 17 percent, with the prevalence of learning disabilities found to be 7.6 percent from 1997-2008.4 The Children's Centers are conducting research to assess how a wide range of chemicals, including certain pesticides; air pollutants, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs); and metals, such as lead, mercury, and manganese; lead to learning and behavioral deficits. Researchers have also discovered that prenatal exposures, not just those that occur after birth, lead to neurological deficits in children.

- High prenatal PAH exposure is associated with a lower mental development index score at age 3 (Bayley Scale) and with increased odds of cognitive developmental delay.7 In children 6-7, high PAH exposure was associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and attention problems.6
- Women with higher phthalate exposures during pregnancy report more disruptive behaviors in their children.7 Phthalates are chemical compounds used in many plastics and some personal care products.
- Children exposed prenatally to high levels of chlorpyrifos, a pesticide, show both enlargement and thinning of certain brain areas, and have lower intelligence testing scores.8

Asthma

One in 11 children has asthma, an inflammatory lung disease. Asthma prevalence more than doubled over the past two decades, especially among urban populations, and cost the U.S. $56 billion annually, with a yearly cost of more than $1,000 for a child with the disease.11 Discovering asthma triggers will help development of prevention strategies. For example, in the past decade, several researchers, have found that living near dense traffic is associated with asthma or long-lasting problems with lung function in children.

- Specifically, diesel soot particulate matter is the component of air pollution most responsible for several respiratory problems among inner-city children.22
- Children living in moldy homes are three times more likely to develop asthma by age 7.13
- Early childhood exposure to the chemical bisphenyl A (BPA) is associated with an elevated risk for asthma in young children.24

What We Want to Learn Next

New and often interconnected areas of research to be addressed include:

- Obesity: What is the role of environmental factors in the epidemic of childhood obesity?
- Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals: How are widespread exposures to these chemicals affecting children, particularly during vulnerable windows of development?
- Epigenetics: How do modifications to DNA, resulting from diet, aging, stress and environmental exposures, affect our children or our grandchildren?
- Microbiome: How do helpful microorganisms in the gastrointestinal tract affect children's health? How is the microbiome affected by environmental exposures, including diet, antibiotic use, and chemicals?
- Immune System: What is the role of environmental triggers in autoimmune diseases? How do early life exposures affect immune responses?
- Cumulative Exposures: Recognizing that people are not exposed to one chemical at a time and are exposed to many chemicals over time, how can assessment be improved?
Community Engagement is Essential

Many parents are eager to learn about simple steps they can take to minimize harmful exposures for their children. To this end, the Children’s Centers apply community-based participatory research techniques, in which community partners play a vital role in informing, implementing, and sharing what the findings mean. Additionally, each center has a designated physician-scientist to ensure research is translated into practical information for health care providers.

Policy Advances Based on Science

Concerns about the health effects of hazardous environmental exposures have led to federal and local policies designed to inform and protect the public.

- Nationally, the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards limit air pollutants emitted from utilities. This policy will help avoid 130,000 asthma attacks every year.16
- In New York City, the passage of two landmark bills in 2005 was bolstered by the testimony of Columbia University researchers, who linked smaller birth size and prenatal pesticide exposure. The bills reduce exposure to certain pesticides through better notification and a reinforced commitment to adopting integrated pest management strategies.
- In any locality, reduction in children’s air pollution exposures can be achieved by considering local traffic volume, not just regional air quality, when siting schools, sports fields, or new homes.15 Some jurisdictions have called for less idling in school bus operations, as a way to reduce diesel fume exposures at minimal cost.

For More Information


EPA: http://epa.gov/ncer/childrenscenters

Watch past and upcoming webinars at http://epa.gov/ncer/childrenscenters/multimedia/index.html