

Scientists call for pollution warning on air fresheners

The Times, Chris Smyth, Health Editor and Rhys Blakely, Science Correspondent - May 24 2019

“Traffic light” health warnings will be needed on deodorants, cleaning products and air fresheners as **evidence mounts that indoor air pollution contributes to serious illness**, scientists say.

Doctors are reviewing the dangers of chemicals released by common household products amid concern that these pollutants will be “the next diesel engine NOx scandal”.

Although there is not enough evidence to be sure how harmful such products are, doctors suggested buying flowers instead of air fresheners.

The Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health are drawing up a review of evidence on indoor pollution in response to findings that volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as formaldehyde can damage health and combine with outdoor pollution to create harmful particles.

“We spend up to 90 per cent of our time indoors. It’s inconceivable that the health effects of outdoor air pollution just occur because of the 10 per cent of time that people spend outdoors,” Stephen Holgate, one of the review authors, said.

Evidence is emerging that papillary thyroid disease is increasing because of brominated flame retardants used in furniture. Asthma is more common in schools that use insecticides.

Previous warnings to avoid such products have been criticised as premature and alarmist. Professor Holgate wants the review to result in “practical useful steps that people can do” but accepts that it is not clear what they will be.

He said: “Liberally going around spraying chemicals around your house that are complex and react with other chemicals — you’ve got to weigh up the benefits of that. Are there not other things you can do, like **buy a nice bunch of flowers?**”

Steps such as a “skull and crossbones” on harmful products could also be recommended by the review, he said, citing red, orange and green labels on food that warn of high sugar, salt or fat.

Better evidence on the effects of pollutants would force companies to make healthier products. “All of these things are amenable, it’s just that [industry] don’t bother because they don’t have to,” he said.

“Why put phthalates in shampoo anyway? Once you know a chemical causes an issue why would you use it when there are alternatives?”

Jonathan Grigg, who is helping to draw up the review, promised “sensible” advice but acknowledged that trading off sources of pollution was difficult. “We don’t want to tell people ‘open a window’ — if you’re on a main road, that’s maybe not a great idea,” Professor Grigg said.

“We are not going to say that everyone has to have an air purifier like in Delhi in their homes but we will consider that in at-risk populations.”

Alastair Lewis, professor of atmospheric chemistry at the University of York, said that it was vital to act quickly. “We don’t want to continuously live through endless cycles of fire-fighting pollutants that we knew about and could have done something about but didn’t,” he said.

“That’s where VOCs are at the moment: you can clearly see that over the next decade we will have to do something about this class of pollutant. Wouldn’t it be nice, just for once, to get ahead of the curve and be acting on these things before they become the next diesel engine NOx scandal?”

Joost de Gouw of the University of Colorado Boulder, who last year found that half of VOCs in Los Angeles air came from domestic products, said: **“Chemical products — cleaning products, personal care products, glues, inks, coatings, pesticides, etc — are now one of the dominant sources of VOCs in urban air.** The one choice that people can make is to use less chemical products in their lives.”