



Taking Toxins Home

Workers can carry hazardous substances home from work in a variety of ways, unwittingly exposing their families to these substances. That can cause various health effects, including respiratory problems, neuralgic disorders and fatal poisonings.

In the 1990s, NIOSH conducted a study on the problem of "take home toxins." The study documented cases in 28 countries and 36 U.S. states, and covered a wide variety of materials, industries and occupations.

According to the NIOSH report, workers can expose their family members to hazardous substances in a variety of ways, including:

- Work clothes. Beryllium, lead, pesticides and other chemicals have all been carried home on clothing. Washing machines and dryers also can become contaminated, poisoning the person doing the laundry as well as contaminating other clothing items.
- Tools and equipment. Mercury, pesticides, PCBs and radioactive material on hand tools and other equipment have contaminated homes and vehicles.
- Items brought home. Bags, rags, metal drums and scrap lumber brought home from work have poisoned family members.
- Cottage industries. Asbestos, lead, parathion and mercury have contaminated the home where work was done on home property.
- Worker's body. A worker's hands can pass dangerous materials to family members.
- Farming. Families who live on the property where farming is done can be exposed to pesticides, caustic substances and a hormone-like chemical that can poison them or cause them to have allergic reactions.

Prevention is the best defense against bringing toxins into the home, NIOSH reported. For those who work away from home, safe practices include:

- Use good safety practices to reduce exposure.
- Leave soiled clothes at work.
- Change clothes before leaving work.
- Store nonwork clothes away from work clothes.
- Shower before leaving work.
- Do not take tools, packaging or similar items home.
- Launder work clothes separately.
- Prevent family members from visiting the work area.

Safe practices for those who work in the home:

- Keep work areas and living areas separate.
- Keep family members out of the work area.
- Store hazardous substances properly.
- Dispose of dangerous materials properly.
- Wash work clothes separately.

For more information, go to NIOSH's "Take Home Toxins" Webpage at www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/hometox.

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