



# Environment

***"The real message of breastmilk contamination is: Stop the reckless degradation of our planet with untested chemicals and don't stop breastfeeding!"***

Dr. Warren Bell  
President, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment

**B**reastmilk is the most ecologically sound and complete food available to infants. It is the foundation of food security for all infants and young children and is one of the world's most valuable renewable natural resources. However, like virtually all of the world's natural resources, breastmilk has been exposed to chemical pollutants.

While this is of some concern, the existence of chemical contaminants in breastmilk should not be a reason to limit breastfeeding. Most health effects on the infant from chemical contamination are associated with either exposure via the placenta in utero, or from fathers, rather than from breastmilk. According to the research of Dr. Eric Dewailly and Dr. Joseph Jacobson, the contaminant exposure in maternal blood causes the same or far greater damage to the fetus than 10 fold higher exposure in breastmilk. Moreover, studies have shown that breastfeeding, even in a contaminated environment, has a positive impact on the development of children as compared to artificially fed children. Breastfeeding provides a vast array of physical and psychological benefits to mothers and babies. Breastfeeding also provides critical components for the development of strong immune systems and protects babies against environmental pollutants and pathogens.

Even where environmental contamination affecting breastmilk is highest, the risks associated with artificial feeding are higher. Heavy metals such as lead, aluminium, cadmium and mercury, chemical residues from pesticides and fertilizers, and hormone-disrupting plasticizers

have all been found in formula. In addition, recalls of infant formula from the market are regularly made because of industrial and bacterial contamination. And infant formulas contain none of the immunological and anti-inflammatory protective constituents found in breastmilk.

The production of infant formula adds significantly to environmental contamination. The consumption of materials (such as fossil fuels, wood products, other kinds of energy, forests cleared for cattle grazing, among others) and the ensuing production of wastes (greenhouse gasses, manufacture/use of metals, plastics, and paper for infant formula packaging) are prominent features of the manufacture, distribution, and use of commercial baby milks and foods. By contrast, the production and consumption of breastmilk is an environmentally benign act.

## **What you can do:**

In order to protect this most valuable natural resource, we should:

- Support the global movement to reduce the use of pesticides and other persistent organic pollutants through initiatives like the UN's Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) and the ILO's Convention No:184 on Health and Safety in Agriculture.
- Support local pesticide bans and promote organic lawn and garden care.
- Endorse **Working Together for a Toxic-Free Future** - a joint statement by the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action (WABA) and the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN.) - **See reverse.**
- **Breastfeed!**

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## **We share a common concern: Toxic chemicals are contaminating our children**

If we tested every infant born today, anywhere in the world, we would find that s/he has a body burden of toxic industrial chemicals. Dioxins, PCBs, mercury, phthalates, pesticides and other dangerous substances are being passed from parent to child as early as the prenatal period.

Tiny doses of these chemicals can have a dramatic effect on the developing child. Levels of mercury that would have no impact on an adult can harm the developing brain of a fetus. A few trillionths of a gram of dioxin and PCBs can damage developing immune and nervous systems. DDT, PCBs, dioxins and other persistent organic pollutants not only cross the placenta, they also enter into breastmilk.

## **We recognize the need to promote breastfeeding while we work towards ending the contamination of our communities**

The contamination of breastmilk is one symptom of the environmental contamination in our communities. Responsibility for this problem belongs to the industrial sources of contamination, not to breastfeeding women. The individual decision to breastfeed must be promoted and protected while we work collectively towards eliminating the chemicals that contaminate the food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, and the products we use.

Studies have shown that breastfeeding, even in a contaminated environment, has a positive impact on the development of children as compared to those who are artificially fed. Breastfeeding supports infant growth and health as well as maternal health in ways that breastmilk substitutes cannot. Indeed, breastmilk contains substances that help the child develop a stronger immune system and other protections against environmental pollutants and pathogens.

Therefore, educational and advocacy efforts to promote a toxic-free future for our children should recognize, encourage and support collective actions aimed at promoting breastfeeding, reducing chemical contamination and developing the strongest possible pollution prevention laws.

## **We share a vision of a toxic-free future and generations of healthy children**

In Sweden, strong governmental programmes to eliminate persistent organic pollutants like DDT, dieldrin, PCBs and dioxin have resulted in dramatic decreases in contaminants in breastmilk. In the United States, bans on lead in gasoline and smoking in public places have resulted in dramatic decreases in the levels of dangerous chemicals in the blood of young children. These public health achievements show that reductions in the production, use and disposal of toxic chemicals, along with the destruction of toxic chemical stockpiles and reservoirs, can decrease the body burden in our children and in all of us. The United Nations Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), the development of sustainable alternatives to dioxin-producing incineration, local and national efforts to restrict the use of pesticides or to phase out the uses and emissions of mercury, all deserve our energetic and sustained support.

## **We pledge to work together towards the day when our infants are born toxin free, and can grow and develop in a toxic-free world.**

This Statement with the latest list of endorsers is available at the WABA & IPEN websites. To endorse, write ASAP to the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action, WABA, and PO BOX 1200, PENANG 10850, MALAYSIA. Fax: 604-6572 655 Email: [secr@waba.po.my](mailto:secr@waba.po.my)