



Fundamentals of Natural Medicine – Environmental Concerns

Living in a Polluted World

IN ADDITION TO concerns about the foods we eat, the modern world is contaminated with tens of thousands of chemicals, some of which have been shown to be allergens, carcinogens, or promoters of various diseases. The adverse effects of environmental chemicals may actually be greater than the research suggests. That is because most chemicals are tested individually for toxicity, but the combined effect of several chemicals is sometimes much greater than that of any single chemical by itself.²⁷ Although it is not possible to avoid pollution completely, you can take measures to reduce your exposure and possibly improve your health.

Lead

ONE of the most universal toxins is lead, which is widely used as an industrial metal. Low-level lead poisoning can cause muscle aches, fatigue, irritability, lethargy, joint pains, trouble concentrating, headaches, and weight loss. Lead may also contribute to heart disease, stroke, hypertension, and osteoporosis. As mentioned previously, some municipal water supplies contain excessive amounts of lead. In addition, approximately 200,000 tons of industrial lead aerosols are emitted annually into the atmosphere

of the northern hemisphere. Some of this lead finds its way into our bodies through the lungs or by falling to the ground and entering the food chain through the soil. Other sources of lead include canned foods and some paints and cosmetics.

It is not known whether the amount of lead the average American is exposed to is a significant cause of symptoms or illness. However, it is noteworthy that the concentration of lead in the skeletons of modern Americans is about 500 times higher than the concentration in the bones of individuals living 1,800 years ago. People can reduce their exposure to lead by avoiding canned foods and by drinking bottled water or water that is filtered in a way that removes heavy metals. In addition, animal studies and some research in humans suggest that people can reduce lead absorption and/or enhance its excretion by supplementing their diets with various nutrients, including vitamin C, zinc, calcium, and magnesium.

Aluminum

ALUMINUM is another potentially harmful metal that is widespread in the environment. Evidence shows that aluminum exposure may play a role in the development of osteoporosis and Alzheimer's disease.²¹ As mentioned previously, aluminum is added to many



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municipal water supplies. Beverages stored in aluminum cans contain three to six times more aluminum than the same beverages stored in glass. Other sources of aluminum include food wrappings, aluminum cookware, sodium aluminum phosphate (a food additive), baking powder, processed cheese, pickles, and some antacids.

Mercury

MERCURY is perhaps the most toxic metal on the planet. Our two major sources of mercury exposure are fish and dental fillings. Fortunately, certain minerals or other molecules present in fish latch onto mercury and form a larger compound that, for some reason, is relatively harmless. However, the same is not true of the mercury in dental amalgams. The act of chewing has been shown to release measurable amounts of mercury vapor from these amalgams into the mouth. In animal studies, placing mercury amalgams in the mouth resulted in abnormalities of immune function, which returned to normal when the mercury was removed from the mouth.

The question of whether mercury fillings represent a health risk to humans has been heatedly debated. Although disagreements persist, we do not believe that the continued use of mercury fillings is

justifiable, considering that many other materials are available in modern dentistry. Whether people should have their old mercury amalgams removed is another question. We have seen some patients in whom an autoimmune disease or other serious illness improved dramatically after their mercury fillings were replaced with other materials. However, only about 10% of those who have undergone amalgam removal have seen significant benefit. Changing one's fillings is expensive and traumatic to the teeth. When considering removing mercury fillings, the potential benefits should be weighed against the cost and the risk of damage to the teeth.

Many other environmental chemicals have been shown to affect human health. While space does not permit a discussion of every known pollutant, we recommend that you remain aware of when you are being exposed to toxic chemicals, and try to avoid unnecessary exposure as much as possible.