

Ask Dr. Weil: Air Fresheners

Are they bad for my health?

By Andrew Weil, M.D., Prevention



Q: I use air fresheners in my home, but have been told I shouldn't. Are they bad for my health?

A: It certainly looks like they are. Recent research strongly suggests that they raise your risk of a number of pulmonary diseases. Last year researchers found that being exposed to chemicals from air fresheners as little as once a week may increase your odds of developing asthma symptoms by 71 percent. And a 2006 study showed that people with high blood levels of the chemical 1,4 dichlorobenzene—commonly found in air fresheners—were more likely to experience a decline in lung function.

Other studies point to a cancer link. University of California, Berkeley, researchers determined that, when used in small, poorly ventilated rooms, some air fresheners emit pollutants that create high levels of formaldehyde, a carcinogen shown to cause cancer in animals and respiratory irritation in humans.

Last year, the Natural Resources Defense Council evaluated 14 air fresheners, 12 of which had varying amounts of phthalates, chemicals that may affect fertility, cause cancer, and trigger developmental abnormalities in infants. The NRDC and other environmental groups filed a petition calling for all air freshener-related products to be tested for consumer safety and regulated by the government.

I recommend freshening the air by opening windows and eliminating the sources of unpleasant odors. If you enjoy aromas indoors, opt for natural items such as a lavender plant, potted herbs, or a bouquet of fresh flowers.

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