

# toxic time bomb

## The hidden enemy

*Cancer: An evil influence or corruption spreading uncontrollably.*

- Oxford Canadian Dictionary

**For its victims, cancer can feel like an evil presence invading their most personal and private space – the body.**

And while genetic makeup, individual immune systems, viruses, age and lifestyle choices are all associated with causing cancer, the role of exposure to environmental toxins can't be ignored or downplayed, says Mae Burrows, executive director of the Labour Environmental Alliance Society, a non-profit organization based in Vancouver.

"It's that low dose exposure to toxins over a period of time that we need to be more aware of," she says. "We accept that when it comes to tobacco smoke ... we should be saying that about other products as well."

The Canadian Cancer Society estimates approximately five per cent of

cancers are related to environmental and occupational carcinogen exposure, and while determining what causes cancer is complex, current scientific evidence suggests people continually exposed to known or potential environmental carcinogens have a higher risk of developing the disease.

"It's usually a number of exposures over time, and there are some [environmental toxins] that are more clearly related to cancer, like asbestos," says Cathy Adair, vice-president of the Canadian Cancer Society.

But it's not only asbestos that is now undeniably linked to cancer – the Ontario College of Family Physicians has done extensive research in the field of environmental toxins and has determined clear associations between exposure to toxic chemicals, commonly used pesticides and cancer of the brain, liver,



- Photo courtesy of the Canadian Cancer Society.

**A researcher in the lab works on finding cures for cancer.**

prostate, kidney and pancreas, as well as Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and leukemia.

But, whether they're sprayed on your lawn or in your living room on a stain-resistant sofa treated with fire retardant, toxins wiggle their way into your system in every way possible, including being inhaled through everyday household dust or absorbed through the skin on contact, says Jan Kasperski, CEO of the OCFP.

And not surprisingly, kids are at the most risk for

developing illnesses related to toxins that can either cause cancer or interfere with developing hormonal, immune or endocrine systems.

"[Kids] have poorly developed kidneys and livers, so toxins that adults may swiftly eliminate from their systems, kids will contain for a much longer period of time," he says. "And, we simply have so many more toxins now, so over the course of a lifetime, children are more and more exposed."

- Robyn Stubbs, 24 hours

## Cancer: The economic machine

Billions of dollars are poured into cancer research each year, and while significant progress is being made, there still seems to be no end in sight to the war on cancer.

For some, the answer is crystal clear:

"You make a lot of money

causing cancer [and] producing pharmaceuticals that don't cure cancer, but maintain people and cancer. It's one of the biggest industries in the country," says Mae Burrows, executive director of the Labour Environmental Alliance Society.

But Burrows isn't the first or only one to call out the cancer establishment – Samuel Epstein of the Cancer Prevention Coalition in the U.S. has voiced similar criticisms since his first book, *The Politics of Cancer*, hit shelves in 1978.

In his latest book, *Cancer-*

*Gate: How to Win the Losing Cancer War*, Epstein argues the medical field is losing an easily won war because cancer-fighting institutions are pouring billions into treatment and virtually nothing into prevention.

- Robyn Stubbs, 24 hours

**From crustaceans to salmon to killer whales, toxic chemicals and persistent organic pollutants are found at every level of the marine food chain. Find out more in tomorrow's 24 hours.**

## little BITS

■ Environmental exposure is now responsible for one quarter of global disease, according to a recent report released by the World Health Organization. The report, entitled *Preventing Disease Through Healthy Environments*, estimates more than 13 million deaths annually – including 1.4 million cancer-related deaths – are due to preventable environmental causes.

■ According to Environmental Defence's *Toxic Nations* report, industry in Canada released nearly 18 million kg of carcinogens, 14 million kg of hormone disruptors, 4.3 billion kg of respiratory toxins and more than 1 billion kg of reproductive/developmental toxicants into the environment in 2003 alone.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 2006 CANADIAN CANCER STATISTICS REPORT ([www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)):

■ An estimated 153,100 new cases of cancer and 70,400 deaths from cancer will occur in Canada in 2006. About 1,300 Canadian children develop cancer each year.

■ Cancer incidence and mortality rates are higher in females than males during the reproductive years although males have higher rates at all other stages of life.

■ On the basis of current incidence rates, 38% of Canadian women and 44% of men will develop cancer during their lifetimes. Approximately one out of every four Canadians will die from cancer.

■ Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma incidence and mortality rates continue to rise this year. In 2001, Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, which has been linked to chemicals used in pesticides, was the fifth most common cancer for both men and women. Incidence rates then had doubled since 1973, and the increasing incidence trend was also most pronounced among young adults.

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