

## Eco-Friendly Purchasing

Toxic chemicals that damage our health can be found in everything from cleaning products to carpets. City leaders can lead by example and lessen exposure for city workers, residents, and visitors by buying products free of toxic chemicals. When our leaders buy eco-friendly products for city buildings, they make it clear that the health of our communities and our environment are worth protecting.

### The Chemical Toxins Challenge

- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that there are more than 80,000 chemicals currently in commerce (actively manufactured, processed, and imported) in the United States,<sup>1</sup> the vast majority of which have not been adequately assessed for their effects on human health or the environment.<sup>2</sup>
- The Toxic Substances Control Act (TOSCA) was passed in 1976, but the federal government still lacks the ability to effectively assess and remove harmful substances from the market,<sup>3,4</sup> resulting in many toxins continuing to be used in everyday products,<sup>5</sup> or created as byproducts during manufacturing or disposal.
- Chemicals leach into their surroundings, causing health risks through the entirety of a product's lifecycle.<sup>6</sup> The degree to which toxic chemicals affect human health and development depends on a variety of factors, such as the manner, duration, and frequency of exposure.<sup>7</sup>

### A Healthy Solution: Eco-Friendly Purchasing

- **Protects people from toxic exposures where they are** – By procuring products and services that avoid harmful substances and practices, municipalities help protect people from toxic exposures inside schools, health care facilities, public housing, office buildings, and other government-operated indoor spaces.
- **Shifts existing expenditures to minimize risk** – Local and state governments spend billions of dollars annually on goods and services.<sup>8</sup> Eco-Friendly Purchasing policies can minimize environmental, health, and safety risks associated with currently purchased products,<sup>9</sup> and these policies can even be cost-neutral.<sup>10,11</sup>
- **Targets areas of highest impact** – This policy targets cleaning products, foodware, and furnishings. These products serve essential functions for local governments but can cause harm in both the short and long term when they contain toxic chemicals.

Transitioning to safe alternatives is a simple way to promote a safe and healthy environment.

### What is the Evidence that Eco-Friendly Purchasing Can Improve Health?

Cleaning products, foodware and furnishings are all essential parts of business and life, but often contain toxins that can cause a myriad of health issues, from thyroid disruption,<sup>12</sup> to respiratory disease,<sup>13</sup> to reproductive issues.<sup>14</sup>

- San Francisco's Eco-Friendly Purchasing Policy led to 85% of janitorial product purchases in 2018 being green,<sup>15</sup> reducing the exposure of janitorial staff, employees in public buildings, and city residents that frequent public buildings.
- The EPA touts the benefits of using green cleaning products to mitigate the health and environmental risks of toxins in traditional products.<sup>16</sup> There are several eco-friendly—or “green”—cleaning product labels that address health and environmental criteria. For example, products carrying the “Safer Choice”,<sup>17</sup> “EcoLogo”<sup>18</sup> and “Green Seal”<sup>19</sup> certifications meet rigorous safety standards.
- Safer standards exist for foodware and furnishings, including certifications from the Biodegradable Products Institute (BPI),<sup>20</sup> Greenhealth,<sup>21</sup> and GreenScreen.<sup>22</sup>
- A case study on a Massachusetts state park found that the state's Environmentally Preferable Products Purchasing Program allowed the park to reduce its use of non-green cleaners, utilizing fewer toxins that would be harmful to both park staff and the public.<sup>10</sup>

### How Can Eco-Friendly Purchasing Help Address Health Disparities?

Demographic factors including age, sex, socioeconomic status, and occupation play a major role in a person's exposure to—and health effects from—toxic chemicals.<sup>23-25</sup> Eco-friendly purchasing policies can help protect those that are disproportionately affected by toxins.

- Workers who perform cleaning duties, such as janitors and health care workers, have an increased risk of respiratory illnesses, including asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).<sup>26-28</sup> A longitudinal study found that between 1998 and 2012, 12% of all confirmed cases of work-related asthma were associated with exposure to cleaning products.<sup>29</sup>
- People of color are more likely to hold jobs in which they come into direct contact with toxic chemicals. A 2023 study utilizing U.S. worker demographic data found that occupational segregation was a driver of racial disparities in chemical hazard exposure.<sup>30</sup>

- The EPA estimates that Americans spend 90% of their time indoors, and that indoor air can be two-to-five times more contaminated by harmful elements than outdoor air.<sup>31</sup> Cleaning supplies and furniture that contain toxins can introduce many harmful chemicals directly into indoor air. Young children, elderly people, and people with health conditions tend to spend even more time inside and are also more susceptible to the adverse effects of the contaminated air.<sup>31</sup>

### What Are Some Future Challenges to Consider?

Regular and constant exposure to a vast array of chemicals in various combinations poses a major challenge to assessing the harmful effects of toxic chemicals, and some researchers consider current exposure evaluation methods inadequate for protecting public health.<sup>32</sup> Researchers are recognizing that “non-chemical stressors,” such as poverty and discrimination, may also affect people’s cumulative risk by increasing their susceptibility to toxic exposures.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, some latent diseases, such as cancer, may not appear until years after initial exposure, making causality difficult to prove.

### Resources for Cities

Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council - [Introduction to Sustainable Purchasing video](#)  
Ecology Center & Safer States - [Sustainable Procurement Policies Roadmap](#)  
Center for Environmental Health – [Procurement Resources](#)

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