

# Stewards of Health and Creation:

*Our call to protect people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from toxic chemicals*

**We are all children of God and hold gifts that we can share; this is true of people with and without disabilities. Those of us who are close to people living with intellectual and other developmental disabilities can help nurture these gifts, and promote understanding of how they can be channeled into caring for our bodies and caring for God's Creation. The goal of this fact sheet is to help people of faith close to or living with intellectual and other developmental disabilities learn about the impact of toxic chemicals and how to make healthy choices to avoid unnecessary exposures.**

## Disability and the Environment

Disability is a natural phenomenon of the human condition. While some disabilities occur naturally, others result from toxic exposure. Disabilities resulting from toxic exposures are unnecessary and preventable. Reducing and adequately regulating toxic chemicals in the environment has a great potential to protect public health and God's Creation. Policies that articulate the rights of people living with disabilities to fully participate in all aspects of society are vital. As people of faith, by providing public witness to the harm caused by toxic exposures and sharing healthier practices with everyone, our communities can all ultimately live more abundantly.

## A Vulnerable Population

As people of faith, we have a shared commitment to care for the most vulnerable members of society—including people with learning, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. For people living with disabilities there are often additional risks for toxic environmental exposures because of the increase in amount of time spent indoors or the decrease in physical activity. More time indoors can increase the amount of exposure to dust or other air pollutants where chemicals can accumulate. In addition, people with disabilities may come in greater contact with toxic chemicals because of their:



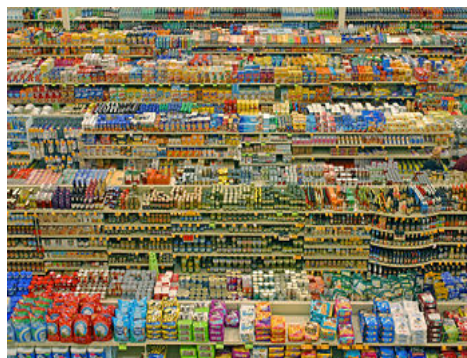
- Increased reliance on plastic adaptive equipment, eating utensils, and special cups, which often contain BPA.
- An inability to remove oneself from irritating fumes
- Difficulty communicating symptoms of toxic exposure to others
- Increased tendency to crawl, sit, lie on the floor when indoors (floors and windowsills have high levels of household dust)
- Pica behaviors beyond infancy and childhood (mouthing or chewing on non-food items), and continued mouth breathing (which may cause greater exposure to contaminated dust -a common source of chemical exposure)
- Sitting for long periods in a car seat, special adaptive equipment, or wheelchair seat (exercise is good for the immune system and elimination of toxins!)
- Altered mobility, such as needing assistance when washing hands (which means less frequent hand washing)
- In general, more compromised immune systems.

***Environmental health refers to how factors such as air, water, food, and recreational activities can impact the development of an already compromised immune system. There are certain practices that are essential to leading a healthy life, such as proper nutrition, being physically active, making mindful purchasing choices, and finding joy in our lives. See the following suggestions.***

## Food

Every meal we eat we are reminded of the generosity of the Creator to sustain us, the hard work of people who grow and prepare our food, and the importance of eating mindfully for our health. Food and nutrition are crucial to the overall health of this disabilities community. Some food choices can nourish the human body. Others can be a source of exposure to unwanted toxics.

Here are some suggestions for healthy food choices:



- Eat whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Eat organic and local when possible to avoid harmful pesticides that can contribute to obesity, cancer, and even developmental disabilities.
- Some toxic chemicals collect in foods, especially in fatty tissue, and move up the food chain; a good example of this is mercury in some fish like tuna, king mackerel, and swordfish. Some cognitive disabilities result from exposures to these chemicals.
- It is also important to drink plenty of water. Water is best when it is filtered and drunk out of clean glass or a stainless steel container, rather than plastic cups or bottles. Some plastics can contribute to health concerns such as obesity, type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, and Alzheimer's disease. Other beverages such as fruit juices and sodas do not substitute for water and can contribute to weight gain.

## Air



Air is the gift that sustains us with each breath of life. If your family or faith community is close to a highway or busy street, you might be breathing in more toxic air. The quality of indoor air can also affect our health. In fact, asthma is triggered more often by poor indoor air quality, which is more concerning for this disabilities population because of the amount of time they spend inside. Cleaning chemicals, fragrances, or house fresheners can contribute to poor indoor air quality. Additionally, chemicals in dust can also impact our abilities to think and breathe clearly.

To improve indoor air quality, use safer cleaning chemicals like distilled white vinegar, or fragrance-free products. Keeping the house clean of dust and buildup will help minimize bad odors and exposure to unwanted toxics that may collect indoors. To get some chemicals out of the air in your home or congregation, you can also use an air filter. By sweeping regularly with the windows open, and keeping windowsills clean, you can also avoid dust building up.

## Personal Care Products

We were all made in God's image and reflect God's creativity. Our personal grooming should reflect the care in which God made us and not pose a threat to our health. Personal care products such as shampoos, conditioners, deodorant, makeup, and even contact lens solutions or eye drops can contain harmful chemicals that can cause cognitive impairment, change when hormones related to reproductive development are released, and increase risk of getting cancer, type II diabetes, and other conditions. Fabric softeners and laundry detergents have similar harmful chemicals in them. Using fragrance-free soaps and other personal care products is a good way to keep exposures at a minimum. Fragrance could cause further cognitive impairment for people with IDD and other health concerns. Chemicals in fragrances can cause rashes or interfere with reproductive development in boys and girls.



## Where We Work, Play, Live, and Pray

If someone you know with developmental or intellectual disabilities works in a place that uses toxic chemicals, you may want to offer support to talk with a supervisor about using safer chemicals or practices. For example, cleaning chemicals used in hospitals, clinics, schools, and office buildings can contribute to cognitive impairment, asthma, and even reproductive harm. Also, talk with your pastor, rabbi, or imam about how to make your house of worship a sacred, toxic free space for all, especially people living with disabilities. In addition to green cleaners, ask about fragrance-free candles or soaps that are not labeled "anti-bacterial" which can cause cognitive impairment or reproductive harm.



## Share Your Story, Lift Up Your Voice!

It is important to be a witness and to share the stories of how you and people close to you living with intellectual, learning, and developmental disabilities are affected by chemicals. Your Senators and Representatives in Congress are there to listen to you. Educating them about how toxic chemicals can affect the quality of life of people with intellectual, learning, and developmental disabilities is an important step towards ensuring a safe and healthy environment for all children of God.