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Cancer, Cancer Everywhere

By Tiffany OCallaghan

Was it hype or health care? on may 6, the President's Cancer Panel published an alarming 240-page report on the risk of cancer from chemicals and other substances in the environment. "The true burden of environmentally induced cancer has been grossly underestimated," the report's authors concluded. "The American people — even before they are born — are bombarded continually with ... these dangerous exposures."

The list of potential threats is exhaustive and, frankly, unavoidable: bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates found in plastic, pesticides, exhaust from traffic, pharmaceuticals in the water supply, industrial chemicals and radiation from medical tests, cell phones and the sun. The authors of the report — Dr. LaSalle Leffall Jr., of Howard University College of Medicine, and Margaret Kripke, professor emerita at the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center — urge the government to increase research and regulation of these carcinogens, which pose "grievous harm," especially to children, and give specific advice to consumers for avoiding them. More than 80,000 chemicals are on the U.S. market, of which only a few hundred have been proved safe, the authors note. "People have the idea that they are being protected and that things that are harmful aren't getting onto the market," says Kripke. "But that's probably wishful thinking." ([See more about the perils of plastic.](#))

In large part, the panel's findings — chiefly that more research is needed — jibe with those of mainstream cancer researchers. But while the report highlights valid data, says Dr. Otis Brawley, chief medical officer of the American Cancer Society, its final conclusions overreach them. "There are environmental causes of cancer. We should not trivialize them, and we do need more research," he says, but the contention that the rate of environmentally caused cancers is "grossly underestimated" is not based in fact. "[The rate] very well may be higher [than the current estimate of 6% of all cancers], but the research has not been done to quantify that." ([See 10 common household toxins.](#))

But that is precisely the point, says Kripke. Although the panel's report concedes that "at this time, we do not know how much environmental exposures influence cancer risk," Kripke says the 6% figure is based on a study from 1981 and long outdated. "A lot has happened in 30 years ... and will still affect people for the next 30 years," she says, which is why the panel argues that we must not wait for proof of harm before protecting the public. In its lengthy policy recommendations, the report calls for, among other things, routine discussions between doctors and patients about environmental exposures and shifting the burden of proof of chemical safety from government to industry.

But researchers' main criticism of the cancer report is that it distracts from the known, major causes of cancers: smoking, obesity, alcohol, sexually transmitted infections. We don't want mothers to be "very

concerned about some chemical in plastic, which might theoretically cause cancer in her child," instead of focusing on the food that's going into the container, says Brawley, estimating that up to one-third of all cancers in the U.S. are obesity-related. So while choosing pesticide-free produce may be a good precaution — indeed, none of the panel's advice is bad — you might be better off simply eating more fruits and vegetables in general, he says. ([See TIME's cancer covers.](#))

SIDEBAR

10 Cancer Panel Recommendations

1. Drink filtered tap water
 2. Store food and water in glass, stainless steel or BPA- and phthalate-free containers
 3. Minimize children's and pregnant women's exposure to carcinogens and endocrine-disrupting chemicals
 4. Choose fruits and vegetables grown without pesticides or chemical fertilizers; wash all produce to remove residues
 5. Choose free-range meat that has not been exposed to antibiotics or growth hormones
 6. Minimize consumption of processed, charred or well-done meats
 7. Turn off lights and electrical devices when they're not in use
 8. Drive a fuel-efficient car; walk, bike or use public transportation
 9. Check home radon levels
 10. Reduce radiation exposure from cell phones and medical tests; avoid UV overexposure
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