

A mum-to-be? Don't paint the nursery and avoid non-stick frying pans: Pregnant women warned over risk to baby from exposure to chemicals

- **New advice warns to avoid paint fumes, new fabrics, furniture and cars**
- **Guidance is from Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists**
- **It also suggests women 'minimise' their use of moisturisers and shower gels**
- **But critics warn the advice will only serve to make women more anxious**

By Jenny Hope

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New advice to pregnant women says painting the nursery and buying furniture may put their unborn babies at risk from exposure to chemicals.

It warns them to avoid paint fumes, or buying new fabrics, furniture and cars - even non-stick frying pans - while expecting or breastfeeding.

Using fresh food rather than processed food will cut down exposure to chemicals in packaging, says a new report from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

And it's not only the kitchen that is a potential minefield - the dressing table harbours products ranging from cosmetics to perfume that could pose a risk, it says.

Women are advised to 'minimise' their use of moisturisers and shower gels and regard the tag of 'natural' or 'herbal' with suspicion.

Other risks to be avoided are using garden pesticides and fly sprays - and taking painkillers 'unless necessary'. The report provides a long list of what pregnant women should not be doing - yet has little evidence that any of it can harm the unborn child.

The RCOG admits pregnant women are surrounded by a complex mixture of hundreds of chemicals in everyday products, most of them unavoidable and low level.

Many are worried about the potential effects on their baby, says the report, so the right approach is 'safety first'. It accepts little is known about the true dangers from environmental chemicals during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Studies in the lab, or involving animals, often don't apply to humans, while research that shows a link between chemicals and hazards to the baby in the womb are not proof of causation. 'On present evidence, it is impossible to assess the risk, if any, of such exposures', says the report. A section headed 'dealing with potential, but unproven, risks to child health' says women are faced daily with 'chemical scare' stories.

It says they may find it difficult to 'effectively deal' with the uncertainty - particularly when there is 'scientific uncertainty'.

But the report claims women should be given information about the uncertainties so they can make informed choices and take 'positive action'.

This takes the form of the 'precautionary approach' to chemical exposure that 'assumes risk is present even when it may be minimal or eventually proves to be unfounded'.



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Dr Michelle Bellingham, Institute of Biodiversity, Animal Health and Comparative Medicine, University of Glasgow, and co-author of the paper, said 'While there is no official advice on this topic available to pregnant women, there is much conflicting anecdotal evidence about environmental chemicals and their potentially adverse effects on developing babies.

'The information in this report is aimed at addressing this problem and should be conveyed routinely in infertility and antenatal clinics so women are made aware of key facts that will allow them to make informed choices regarding lifestyle changes.'

However, other experts were sceptical the new advice would do anything but make pregnant women even more anxious.

Prof David Spiegelhalter, Winton Professor for the Public Understanding of Risk at the University of Cambridge, said 'These precautionary 'better safe than sorry' recommendations are not necessarily cost-free. 'They may feed anxiety, and detract attention from the known harms of bad diet, smoking and excessive alcohol. And it is unclear how any benefits can ever be assessed.'

Justine Roberts, CEO and Co-founder of Mumsnet, said 'Pregnant women are constantly bombarded by often contradictory information telling them what they can and can't do. 'This latest list of things pregnant women might want to avoid is bamboozling because of the sheer volume of things on it which in practical terms makes it almost impossible to follow. 'What mums to be could do with is some clear, evidence-based guidance, on how much of what is safe to consume and what needs to be avoided altogether.'



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Tracey Brown, managing director of the campaign group Sense About Science, said 'Pregnancy is a time when people spend a lot of time and money trying to work out which advice to follow, and which products to buy or avoid.



The simple question parents want answered during pregnancy is: 'Should we be worried?' 'What we need is help in navigating these debates about chemicals and pregnancy. Disappointingly, the RCOG report has ducked this. 'As the report itself shows, there are many unfounded rumours about links between particular substances and pregnancy outcomes.

'By contrast, we have plenty of evidence that stress is a major risk factor in pregnancy. Researchers and professional bodies should not be adding to it' she added.

The Royal College of Midwives was similarly concerned about the effect on women coping with the known stresses of pregnancy.

RCM professional policy advisor Janet Fyle said 'It is common sense advice, such as using fresh food rather than processed foods.

'However, pregnant women must take this advice with caution and use their common sense and judgement and not be unnecessarily alarmed about using personal care products, such as moisturisers, cosmetics and shower gels. 'There needs to be more scientific and evidence-based research into the issues and concerns raised by this paper.'