

# New study pregnant with anti-chemical quackery

By ACSH Staff — January 14, 2011

An [outlandish study](#) [1] from professors at the University of California, San Francisco, published today in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives*, reports that almost all pregnant women harbor at least one out of 163 different “potentially harmful” chemicals in their blood, urine or serum.

Newspapers across the country promptly and uncritically repeated the study’s assertions. Among those parroting the report was no less than *The Washington Post*.

But it’s important to note that the researchers didn’t actually do any testing. They provided no original research. Instead, they simply re-reported survey data already provided by the CDC from the 2003 to 2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) database. Then they reinterpreted this data without giving readers the actual trace chemical concentration levels reported by the CDC, dogmatically asserting that these already well-known numbers had a meaning that expert toxicologists and CDC officials had somehow missed. Finally, they termed their work a “study”.

The “study” puts forward a blanket condemnation of nearly everything which can be called a chemical. Included in this all-encompassing critique is mercury, which the new report asserts causes neurological problems in fetuses, and phthalates, which it claims affect male reproductive systems in developing babies. How did other experts miss these horrible truths when the data was first released by the CDC years ago? Maybe it was because — as real scientists knew something about the chemicals involved — they understood that while too much mercury *is* dangerous and phthalates *are* toxic at some level in bodily tissue, neither is a grave threat at trace levels. But trace levels are what the CDC found in actual American women.

We at ACSH saw just one account of the study which mentioned the well-known scientific truism, acknowledged by the CDC, that the mere detection of a substance in a person’s body does not make it a health threat.

One example of the study’s lack of substance appears in its obsession with mercury, which typically is absorbed by eating fish. The study authors neglect to mention that in a January 2009 risk/benefit analysis of fish consumption and mercury, the FDA found that consuming greater quantities of fish *boosts* infants’ brain development during and after pregnancy.

Ironically, among the study’s findings is that the trace levels of these chemicals exist in somewhat *higher* concentrations in non-pregnant women. Why is that not the report’s focus? Dr. Ross explains: “Obviously this was just a side note in the article since the presence of chemicals in pregnant women makes for headlines. But haven’t women been pregnant in harmony with parts per billion or parts per trillion of these chemicals in their bodies for a long, long time? And aren’t all

chemicals 'potentially harmful', including sodium chloride, glucose, and dihydrogen monoxide — water? Is it somehow worse now? Are there more babies being born with deformities, but the CDC has somehow failed to notice or comment on this? Did they not bother to analyze their own data?"

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan adds, "This is a politically motivated attack on chemicals in our environment. It's not science, and it's not research. It is another plank in the campaign for the 'reform' of the TSCA — the Toxic Substances Control Act."

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