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## **Children subject to invisible threats Governments making national plans to protect children against chemicals and radiation**

### **Note for the press EURO/23/05 Copenhagen and Helsinki, 12 December 2005**

At a meeting of the European Environment and Health Committee (EEHC) to be held in Helsinki, Finland on 12-13 December 2005, scientists and policy-makers will discuss the progress that is being made in protecting children from chemicals, noise, radiation and other hazards. At a ministerial conference held in Budapest, Hungary in June 2004, governments across the WHO European Region pledged to reduce children's exposure to hazards in the environment. EEHC is reviewing the progress that countries have made since then. It focuses on the four Regional Priority Goals on air pollution, unsafe water, accidents and injuries that are set out in the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe. Regional Priority Goal IV, on chemicals and other agents, will be on the agenda in Helsinki.

#### Threats from chemicals and radiation

The hazards presented by chemicals or radiation are invisible. In many cases, their effects are unknown, and chemicals and new technologies should be approached with caution. The results of studies on exposure in animals or of human beings in various occupational groups may give cause for concern, and the effects on children are not known. Children in the European Region are in general healthier than those in previous generations, but there are unexplained problems, even in countries with low rates of poverty or illness among babies. For example, children may experience high rates of asthma or other chronic conditions. Childhood cancer is still rare, however; The European health report 2005 indicates that the incidence ranges roughly from about 1 child in 700 to one child in 400 developing cancer before his or her fifteenth birthday, but these figures are considered to be conservative. Not all countries have comprehensive cancer registers. In most cases, the causes of cancer are unknown. For exposure to some factors, however, the scientific evidence for causality is more clear cut.

The EEHC meeting will highlight concerns about modern diagnostic techniques that expose children and pregnant women to high levels of radiation. Exposure to ionizing radiation, for example, has the potential to cause childhood cancer.

Computerized tomography scans can give quite large doses of radiation and should only be used when there are no alternatives. A recent study indicated that, in Japan, which has the highest estimated annual exposure frequency in the world, such scans are responsible for 3.2% of population cancer. Scanner technology has moved so fast that research to determine what is safe has been left behind, and determining the health effects may take generations.

Ultrasound scans are another example: they are sometimes given to pregnant women for non-medical reasons: for example, simply to take an extra picture of the baby for the family album. The scans given can be of quite high intensity, and the effects of ultrasound on the fetus are simply not known. More predictive thinking and research are needed. Further, excessive exposure to ultraviolet radiation in sunlight, to which northern European populations are particularly sensitive, causes skin cancer and

probably melanoma.

A number of other chemical, physical and biological agents are suspected to be carcinogenic or to threaten children's health in a different way. Some chemicals that have been used for generations, such as lead, still cause concern. Lead is a major threat to children's health in several countries. For example, the Roma population in Kosovo (Serbia and Montenegro) is exposed to excessive levels of heavy metals from old mining tailings. Leaded petrol is still used in some countries and puts children's development at risk.

New policy on chemicals testing

Thousands of chemicals are in high-volume production for the market, but have not been tested for their impact on human health, let alone children's health. Within the European Union (EU), these will be tackled through the new REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of CHEMicals) policy, which will lead to more safety testing. The new EU chemicals agency, due to open in Helsinki in 2007, will act as a central point in the REACH system. Outside the EU, however, many countries do not regulate chemicals, and children may be under threat from contamination.

The web site of the WHO Regional Office for Europe offers more information about EEHC ([www.euro.who.int/eehc](http://www.euro.who.int/eehc)), the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (<http://www.euro.who.int/document/e83338.pdf>) and The European health report 2005. Public health action for healthier children and populations (<http://www.euro.who.int/ehr2005>).

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