

## FAQ: Fragrances

### **Where are fragrances found and how are children exposed?**

Many common household cleaning products, personal care products, air fresheners, and other items, contain fragrances. Examples include scented detergents, hand lotions, lip gloss, candles, incense, and felt-tip art markers. Some fragrances are synthetic (man-made), and others are naturally derived, such as essential oils. Children are exposed to fragrance chemicals primarily through direct skin contact and through the inhalation of some compounds (volatile organic compounds or VOCs) that readily evaporate from the scented product into the air.

### **What are the dangers of fragrances?**

Many synthetic chemicals in fragrances are derived from petrochemicals (petroleum-based), and can be harmful to human health. Chemicals found in man-made fragrances include phthalates, which are endocrine disruptors, and benzene derivatives, aldehydes, and toluene, which are known carcinogens. Some fragrance compounds are neurotoxicants and others are linked with reproductive birth defects. In addition, some children and adults have allergic or hypersensitivity reactions to fragrance chemicals. Allergic and asthmatic children are at especially high risk.

### **Is “unscented” the same as “fragrance-free”?**

A “fragrance-free” label indicates that there is no added fragrance to the product whereas an “unscented” label indicates that a fragrance was added to mask or cover-up any other chemical smells. The fragrances used in “unscented” products can also contain phthalates and other harmful chemicals. Be sure to select products labeled as “fragrance-free” rather than those labeled as “unscented”!

### **Are scented candles okay?**

Scented candles are popular gifts and enjoyed by many, but harmful fragrance chemicals that are added to them can be released into the air and inhaled by children. In addition, fragrance oils can soften the wax so that the candle does not burn cleanly. Thus, more black soot is emitted from candles containing fragrance than is released from fragrance-free candles. Black soot can not only damage homes and furnishings, it can also be harmful to human health. Soot particles can travel deep into our lungs, exacerbating respiratory illness and disease.

### **What about “natural” fragrances like essential oils and incense?**

Essential oils are often perceived as safer alternatives to synthetic fragrances, and are used in many cleaning products and personal care products advertised as “green” or “all-natural”. However, even though they are naturally-derived (from plants), they are not necessarily safer, as plants can contain many harmful and even toxic compounds. The chemical compounds found in essential oils are highly concentrated and potent, and can also be harmful to human health, causing skin irritations and respiratory distress and even cancer.

Natural incense is often made of plant materials and essential oils. Burning this incense releases volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and also harmful particle pollution into the air. It is best to deodorize by opening a window or placing an open box of baking soda or a small bowl of vinegar somewhere in the room - out of the reach of children.

### **How can I minimize my use of fragrances?**

- Know your labels:
  - Scented
  - “Unscented” - these products may still contain fragrance chemicals.
  - Choose products labelled as “fragrance-free”.
    - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s “Safer Choice” label for cleaning products helps consumers identify and select products with safer chemical ingredients. This program now also has a new “Fragrance Free” label.

Cleanliness is not determined by a smell, such as citrus or pine. Clean does not have a smell.

- Deodorizing a room is possible just by opening a window or placing an open box of baking soda or small bowl of vinegar somewhere in the room - out of the reach of children.
- Keep trash sealed at all times and take it outside frequently.
- If you must use candles, avoid the scented ones and burn only those made from 100% beeswax, soy, or palm oil. These candles burn cleaner and longer than those made with paraffin wax. They are generally also non-toxic and non-allergenic, and bee’s wax is naturally fragrant.