

# Getting Started on Choosing Safer Products and Chemicals At Your Health Care Institution

Every person is exposed to a complex mixture of hundreds of exogenous chemicals every day. Industrial societies are experiencing an increase in diseases and conditions such as cancers, birth defects, and infertility that are linked, to a varying extent, with environmental exposures. Every newborn baby is born with industrial chemicals in his or her body due to our exposure to chemicals in everyday consumer products.

One important way that we are exposed to chemicals is through the manufacture, use and disposal of products used every day, including many of the products used in health care. Our current regulatory system doesn't require adequate testing for products, nor does it remove chemicals of concern from products on the market. Further, our system doesn't provide the information we need to make informed purchasing decisions.

Products that don't contain inherently dangerous chemicals and products whose ingredients are fully tested are possible! Choosing safer products and chemicals is an essential part of health care. Health care institutions have a particular ethical responsibility to use products containing chemicals that pose less risk to human health.

Health care institutions are also crucial partners in reducing our exposure to toxic chemicals. By choosing safer products and

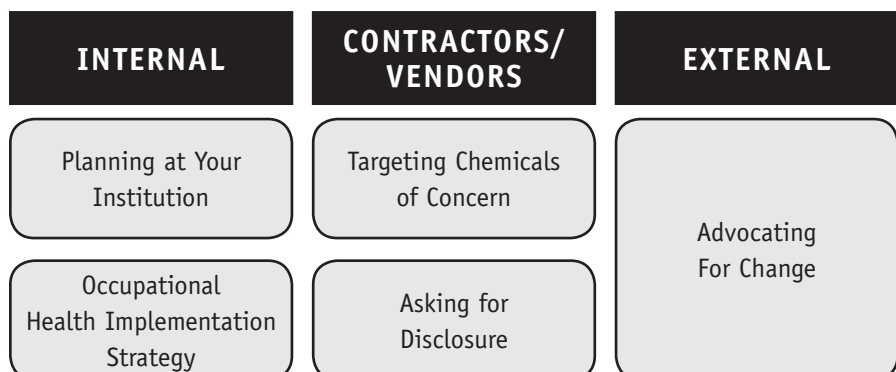
chemicals, health care institutions can:

- eliminate known hazards and switch to safer alternatives,
- improve the bottom line by reducing disposal costs and liability,
- ensure a healthier environment for patients and employees, and
- transform the design and manufacture of products.

The purpose of choosing safer products and chemicals and implementing an institutional comprehensive chemicals policy program is ultimately to improve human and ecosystem health by changing our approach to chemicals manufacture, use, management, regulation, and information, driving the design of products and processes towards least toxic design.

Every health care system and hospitals large and small can make a difference by making safer choices. This document introduces the new Health Care Without Harm publication, *Guide to Choosing Safer Products and Chemicals: Implementing Chemicals Policy in Health Care*, and provides resources for getting started on choosing safer products and chemicals at your institution.

The key steps to getting started include actions internally within your organization, working with contractors and vendors, and through external advocacy for change.



# INTERNAL

## PLANNING AT YOUR INSTITUTION

A key step to taking action on safer products and chemicals is to make an institutional commitment to work on the issue. There are several ways for your institution to move forward on adopting a statement articulating broad goals and principles of your commitment. The Guide provides examples provided by institutions that have already made a commitment. Another way to move forward is to adopt existing principles outlined by the Business NGO work group. Either approach signals your intent.

### What to do

Adopt internal guidelines for addressing chemicals in products.

### Case Study

#### Kaiser Permanente's Organizational Guideline – Chemicals

To advance an economy where the production and use of chemicals are not harmful for humans as well as for our global environment and its non-human inhabitants, Kaiser Permanente adopts the following five guiding principles for chemicals:

1. Understand product chemistry.
2. Assess and avoid hazards.
3. Commit to continuous improvement.
4. Support industry standards that, in KP's opinion, eliminate or reduce known hazards and promote a greener economy, including support for green chemistry research and education.
5. Inform public policies and be part of the public dialogue that advances the implementation of the above principles.

Access KP's full guideline as: [http://www.busngoworkgroup.org/pdf/KP\\_Chem\\_Strat\\_Prin\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.busngoworkgroup.org/pdf/KP_Chem_Strat_Prin_Guide.pdf). Also see Business NGO Working Group guideline at: <http://www.busngoworkgroup.org/guidingPrinciples.php>.

## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Products used in healthcare can pose occupational hazards for employees, and result in lost work time and other costs. Prioritizing safer products without these risks can be part of a safer products/chemicals policy plan at your institution, and including an occupational component can help build internal support for the plan.

### What to do

- Prioritize workplace safety as part of a safer products and chemicals policy plan.
- Identify or create a worker committee at your institution with a charge to develop and implement a program to decrease workplace chemical exposures.

### Case Studies

#### Nurses' Health: A Survey on Health and Chemical Exposures

A nationwide survey of more than 1,500 nurses suggests associations between the health of nurses and their children from nurses' long-term exposures to the many hazardous chemicals, drugs, and other agents to which they are exposed over the course of a workday. Survey available at: [http://www.ewg.org/sites/nurse\\_survey/analysis/main.php](http://www.ewg.org/sites/nurse_survey/analysis/main.php)

#### The Luminary Project: Nurses Lighting the Way to Environmental Health

This Project captures illuminating stories of nurses' activities to improve human health by improving the

health of the environment. The shining stories show how nurses are creatively and strategically addressing environmental problems and illuminating the way towards safe hospitals, communities with clean air, land and water and children born without toxic chemicals in their bodies. Project website at: [www.theluminaryproject.org](http://www.theluminaryproject.org)

## CONTRACTORS/VENDORS

### TARGETING CHEMICALS OF CONCERN

Chemicals known to be hazardous can still be used in common consumer products used in health care. Some health care institutions have targeted certain categories of hazardous chemicals for attention. Cancer centers may want to focus on removing carcinogens from products, children's centers may want to focus on developmental toxicants. Other institutions have targeted PBTs (persistent, bioaccumulative toxic chemicals or chemicals that build up in the food chain and don't break down in the environment), known asthmagens, brominated flame retardants and perfluorinated chemicals. Others have used existing government lists of chemicals of concern.

### What to do

- Require disclosure of targeted chemicals of concern in purchased products.
- Reduce the purchase of products containing chemicals of concern.
- Identify a small set of chemicals that are of particular concern to your institution, and begin to communicate with your vendors about this list.

Product Description	Product Catalogue Number	MSDS Submitted (Y or N)	As indicated on the Environmental Disclosure list the Chemicals of Concern and Concentration unit of measurement per Product		Name of Available Substitute Product that will not have an adverse impact on the environment	Name of Alternative Replacement Chemical Component Material
			Chemical of Concern	Unit of Measurement		
Product x						
Product y						

## Case Study

### Example Environmental Disclosures

[Your health system] is committed to minimizing the amount of chemicals of concern used in its operations and desires to avoid the acquisition of products that contain chemicals of concern whenever feasible alternatives exist that do not compromise patient care. Health System requires that suppliers (through a General Purchasing Organization when applicable) meet specific disclosure requirements for the following chemicals of concern: mercury, cadmium and lead; latex; polyvinyl chloride plastic; phthalates; halogenated organic chemicals; persistent bioaccumulative and toxic chemicals (PBTS); carcinogens and reproductive toxins. In addition Health System requires disclosure of information related to: renewable materials, hazardous waste, and recycled content, reduced packaging and end of life. See Case Study Table above.

## ASKING FOR DISCLOSURE

Most consumer products are not labeled, making it difficult to determine the chemical and material components of products. Further, many chemicals have little to no data on their health and environmental impacts. One step in addressing this data gap is to alert vendors that in the future, additional basic information about product chemistry and safety testing will be requested.

## What to do

- Ask suppliers for information about chemical ingredients and chemical testing data.
- Send a signal to vendors that product ingredient lists and extent of testing will be required in the future.
- Compare products before purchasing.

## Case Study

### Suggested Chemical Disclosure Questions for Suppliers of Products

- Do you know all chemical and material ingredients in this product?
- When a list is available, are you willing to share an ingredient list for this product publicly?
- Would you be willing to provide a full ingredient list for this product to a third party?
- Product contains no untested chemicals?

## EXTERNAL

### ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE

Health care professionals remain trusted public opinion leaders. Health care has an important role to play in adequately regulating chemicals of concern. An advocacy strategy is a plan to influence policy beyond your institution in order to make it possible for you to choose safer products and chemicals and improve environmental health.

Though health care institutions can help create a market for safer products by targeting chemicals of concern and asking for disclosure, we can't purchase our way out of this problem. Policy changes at the state and national level will be required to give consumers, including health care institutions, the full right to know about ingredients in products. The most efficient way to get data on chemical hazards of all chemicals is for that requirement to be legislated. Therefore, health care institutions, as users of chemicals, have an interest in better laws regulating chemicals.

The American Medical Association, American Nurses Association and the American Public Health Association have all passed resolutions calling for reform of our chemical laws, and health care leaders have begun to advocate for change at the state and federal level.

## What to do

- Advocate for state and federal policy changes
- Support state legislation to phase out chemicals of concern in your state.
- Support federal legislation to address the failures of the current chemical regulatory system.

## Case Study

### Testimony of Kathy Gerwig, Kaiser Permanente

Testimony to the House Committee on Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection, Hearing on *Revisiting the Toxic Substances Control*

Act of 1976, February 26, 2009:

*“As we strive to advance an economy where the production and use of chemicals are not harmful for humans or the environment around us, we invest significant time and resources. When we were testing alternatives to vinyl flooring, we had to invent our own testing protocol and use in-house certified industrial hygienists to perform tests to understand the health impacts of the alternatives. That degree of investment is simply not feasible for most products and materials we buy, nor is it possible for smaller organizations that do not have the resources and organizational skills that Kaiser Permanente has developed over decades. Mechanisms are needed to support downstream users in procuring the safest products and materials for our needs.”*

Hearing at: [http://energycommerce.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1505](http://energycommerce.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1505)

## Resources for Getting Started on Choosing Safer Products and Chemicals for Health Systems

### Publication

Guide to Choosing Safer Products and Chemicals: Implementing Chemicals Policy in Health Care,  
<http://www.noharm.org/us/chemicalpolicy/guide>

### Contacts

#### For GPOs:

Beth Eckl, Practice Greenhealth  
[beckl@practicegreenhealth.org](mailto:beckl@practicegreenhealth.org)

#### HCWH Chemical Policy Program:

Cheyenne Chapman, HCWH  
[cheyenne\\_chapman@comcast.net](mailto:cheyenne_chapman@comcast.net)



1901 North Moore St.  
Suite 509  
Arlington, VA 22209  
Phone: 703.243.0056  
Fax: 703.243.4008  
[www.noharm.org](http://www.noharm.org)  
[info@hcwh.org](mailto:info@hcwh.org)

This publication is part of *Going Green: A Resource Kit for Pollution Prevention in Health Care*. For additional copies of this or other publications included in the kit, or to find out how to get a complete kit, visit Health Care Without Harm on the Web at [www.noharm.org/goinggreen](http://www.noharm.org/goinggreen).



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