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Towards the later stages of your pregnancy, your nesting instinct might kick in. But before it does, here's what you need to know about what's not quite safe for you and your bub.

WORDS STEPH DAN

Household Hazards to Avoid when Pregnant

The period before your little one arrives can be filled with much joy and anticipation, but it is also undoubtedly a most trying time for future mums (and dads!). As a mum-to-be, your child's safety is your number one priority and you want to ensure that he or she is kept healthy throughout the pregnancy. Besides taking care to not do the obvious (no smoking or drinking), there are hidden dangers around the house that should also be addressed. *Motherhood* compiles a list of potential household hazards, for the worried mum-to-be:

1 Paint

You might be looking forward to setting up the nursery, and repainting the walls is part of the plan. However, it is best to avoid any contact with lead and solvent-based paints, says **Dr Christopher Ng** at the **GynaeMD Women's & Rejuvenation Clinic**. Harmful effects could include developmental delays for your baby and/or birth defects.

Instead of those that are lead-based, choose latex or acrylic paint. These are generally considered to be safe as they do not contain any solvents and can be cleaned up easily with soap and water. Make sure that the area is well ventilated, and cover up with a long-sleeved shirt and gloves while painting.

Or better yet, hire a professional to do the job for you. Afterwards, keep the windows open to rid the area of paint fumes. Although the risk of such paint fumes being harmful to your baby is low, it would be best to limit exposure especially in the first trimester when the foetal organs are developing, says Dr Ng.

2 Air Quality

Both mother and child can be adversely affected by bad air quality, although the exact amount of exposure

needed to produce harmful effects has not been determined, says Dr Christopher Chong, obstetrician, gynaecologist, and urogynaecologist at Gleneagles Hospital Singapore.

A direct consequence of polluted air is that it reduces the amount of oxygen the foetus is getting and this causes harmful products to build up in the body.

The placenta may also be affected, resulting in poor transfer of oxygen and nutrients from mum to child. This leads to slow development of the foetus, and in the worse case scenario, may affect foetal brain growth.

The reduced activity in lifestyle that comes with being pregnant means you might be staying indoors more often than not. Thus it is ever more important that the air quality inside your house be kept optimal. To start off, make sure to regularly clean down air ducts, drapes, and rugs and carpets, as these are dust magnets. Install a dehumidifier to eliminate moisture, as this prevents mould from forming and keeps the air clean. And even if you might not smoke, ensure that other family members and guests avoid smoking in the house.

3 Cleaning Products

Cleaning products are generally safe to use, says **Dr Ng**. However, to play it safe, always check labels to confirm that the specific product is non-toxic before purchasing it. (Although ammonium and

chlorine in bleach might make you feel a little nauseated, they are not poisonous.) Always remember to ventilate the room while cleaning, and wear rubber gloves.

And if you really want to be sure, go green. Use all-natural cleaning products, such as a vinegar-and-water mix, or baking soda.

4 Pesticides

Although there is minimal direct exposure to farming pesticides locally, other forms of contact in everyday life include consuming pesticide-coated food crops and household products such as bug sprays, rodent poisons, and insect repellents. High exposure to such pesticides has been associated with preterm births, miscarriages, and birth defects, says **Dr Ng**.

It would be a good idea to switch to organic when possible. For families on a lower budget, however, you can take note to buy fruits and veggies that are in season, since these require less pesticide use in the growing process. Washing thoroughly, or removing the outer leaves and skin also helps.

As for household insecticides, read and follow the directions on labels clearly when using, or better yet, have someone else handle it. Alternatives would be to use mousetraps or sticky traps. For repellents, choose those without the chemical DEET as an ingredient as there are some concerns about its toxicity.

5 Cosmetics

Unfortunately, there is a laundry list of unsafe ingredients that go into makeup (such as parabens and phthalates). As a rule of thumb, choose only those brands that use pure or natural minerals; for perfumes, pick those that use natural oils for fragrance. You can still continue to enjoy manicures and pedicures, as long as the polish is free of chemicals such as DBP, formaldehyde, and toluene.

Dr Ng points out a specific ingredient present in skin whitening and anti-pigmentation products, called hydroquinone. He recommends that these as well as acne creams containing roaccutaine should be avoided, as they are teratogens, meaning that they can hinder foetal development and cause birth defects.

It is also best to err on the side of caution and put off any hair-coloring plans: even though there have not been reliable studies that show that this is unsafe for the baby, these substances can enter the bloodstream through the scalp. Otherwise, choose a procedure that has less scalp contact, such as getting highlights, or use vegetable-based dyes such as henna.

6 Plastics

Plastics go into everything, from food containers and water bottles, to furniture and packaging, and most children toys. It is probably impossible to avoid the use of plastics altogether, but you can definitely make conscious choices to pick the types that are safer and eco-friendly.

Plastic products in Singapore use an identification code developed by the Society of the Plastics Industry in the United States. This classifies plastics into seven main types; products are marked with a number each from 1 to 7, usually on the bottom.

Avoid products that are marked with 3 and 7. Plastics that fall under Code 3 are made from Polyvinyl chloride (better known as PVC), which contains lead, is carcinogenic and have been linked to birth defects.

A family of chemicals called phthalates is also often added in to make PVC softer and more flexible, and these have been linked to hormonal disruptions, and reproductive and neurological damage.

7 is a big group encompassing all the plastics that do not fall in the other categories, including Bisphenol A (BPA), which may cause problems with your baby's brain and behaviour. If you find it difficult to avoid products marked with 3 and 7 altogether, making sure to use these correctly (such as not putting them in contact with boiling water) would be paramount.

7 Pets

Cat litter and faeces contain a parasite that results in toxoplasmosis infection, which can cause miscarriages or stillbirth of the foetus, says Dr Ng.

Before you give your pet cat away, however, it might be comforting to know that cats that rarely go outside are unlikely to carry toxoplasmosis. Also, it takes 24 hours for the toxoplasmosis infection to set in, so dangers are reduced if you clear the litter out regularly. Still, the safest way would be to leave the cleaning up to the husband, and make sure he washes his hands thoroughly after.

Debunking Some Myths

Some mums-to-be have heard horror stories about the link between radiation and birth defects. However, Dr Chong says that radiation from household technological devices and electrical appliances are generally safe as radiation is minimal and of the non-ionizing type (different from X-rays). So do not worry too much about using microwaves, or if your 9 to 5 desk job requires you to work with a computer.

Also, both Dr Ng and Dr Chong reassure mums that drinking directly from the tap is very safe in Singapore. If you want to be sure, investing in a water purifier or regularly cleaning out the inside of your faucet are things you can do to calm your fears.

Putting It In Perspective

Even though there seems to be a barrage of potential dangers to take note of for a safe pregnancy, do not spend too much time worrying. Dr Tan Eng Kien, senior consultant at NUH Women's Centre, says that although there is a concern that exposure to hundreds of chemicals at low levels could interact to cause harmful effects, with a normal lifestyle and diet, the level of exposure of most women to individual environmental chemicals will probably pose little risk to the developing baby.

Keeping this list in mind will definitely help in making sure your home becomes a pregnancy-safe zone. Coupled with making sure to follow important habits such as eating right and getting plenty of rest, and you are definitely on the right track to keep you and your little one healthy. 

