



## HUMAN HEALTH AND THE CANADIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ACT (CEPA): AN OVERVIEW

### The Issue

More than 23,000 different chemicals and substances are available for use in consumer goods and industrial processes in Canada. While many of these substances contribute to improving our standard of living, some may also pose risks to our health.

### Background

Environment Canada and Health Canada share responsibility under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA) to assess threats posed by chemicals and other substances and to undertake risk reduction measures where necessary. Environment Canada focuses on risks to the environment, while Health Canada focuses on risks to human health.

CEPA gives the government the authority to take action to protect the environment and the health of the Canadian public from risks associated with pollution, dangerous substances, and products of biotechnology. It allows the government to control the entire life-cycle of a "CEPA-toxic" substance, from development to disposal. It also directs the government to conduct research on substances that may disrupt hormones.

CEPA serves as a safety net by requiring environmental and health assessments for substances and products of biotechnology that are not regulated by other Acts, such as the Pest Control Products Act. Assessments are being conducted on all new substances and products of biotechnology before they are allowed

onto the market in Canada, as well as on those that are currently used in Canada.

### The CEPA Definition of "Toxic"

Under the Act, a substance is considered "CEPA-toxic" if it enters or may enter the environment in amounts that may pose a risk to:

- human health
- the environment (such as fish or wildlife)
- the environment upon which life depends (such as water, soil, and air)

### Health Canada's Role

Under CEPA, Health Canada must assess and manage the human health risks associated with the use of "CEPA-toxic" substances in the environment. To assess risks, Health Canada scientists look at a number of factors, including:

- the type of hazard a substance is likely to pose. For example, does it irritate the skin, damage the lungs, affect human reproduction or have the potential to cause cancer?
- the level of exposure at which health damage is likely to occur. For example, would it take a small or large amount of the substance to trigger adverse health effects?



- the amount that people would be exposed to, and the way the exposure would happen. For example, is the substance used in consumer goods? Is it released into the air, soil, or water?

When combined, these factors determine the level of risk posed by a substance. For example, a substance used in a closed manufacturing process might be quite hazardous. But, if it is never released into the environment, the human health risk for the general public would be quite low.

On the other hand, a less hazardous substance might pose a serious risk to human health if large amounts were released near a source of drinking water. In this case, Health Canada and Environment Canada would manage the risk by imposing appropriate controls on the manufacture, import, use, release, and disposal of the substance. These controls can range from outright bans, which are rare, to restrictions, guidelines, and codes of practice.

Health Canada applies these principles of risk assessment and risk management to all of the substances it regulates under CEPA. New substances, including chemicals and biotechnology products, are assessed before they are allowed to enter the Canadian marketplace.

There is also a program to identify the risks of substances that were already in use in Canada when CEPA came into effect. There are roughly 23,000 of these "existing substances." CEPA establishes a framework and certain deadlines to ensure

timely implementation of risk management plans for any existing substance found to pose an undue risk to human health.

## An Ongoing Responsibility

The government's responsibility to protect human health and the environment is ongoing. A parliamentary committee reviews CEPA every five years. This process ensures that CEPA will remain effective and Canadians will continue to enjoy the highest standards of environmental and health protection.

## Enforcement Under CEPA

Environment Canada carries out regular inspections and investigations to ensure that regulations governing "CEPA-toxic" substances are followed. The maximum penalties for convicted violators can include fines of up to \$1 million a day and / or prison terms of up to three years.

## How You Can Help

All Canadians have a role to play in controlling "CEPA-toxic" substances. If you know about violations of CEPA regulations, report them to the Environment Canada office nearest you. There are safeguards in place to protect your identity.

Be careful when using chemicals and other substances in your home and workplace. Follow directions carefully, and call your local municipality if you need

advice about the safe disposal of toxic substances.

## Need More Info?

For more details about Health Canada's role under CEPA, please see the following It's Your Health fact sheets:

Assessing and Managing the Health Risks of Living Biotechnology Products under (CEPA)

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/cepa\\_biotech\\_products.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/cepa_biotech_products.html)

Assessing and Managing the Health Risks of Existing Substances Under CEPA

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/assessing.html>

Assessing and Managing the Health Risks of New Substances Under CEPA

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/cepa\\_new\\_substances.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/environment/cepa_new_substances.html)

For more information on safe environments visit Health Canada's Safe Environments Web site at:

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/hecs/sep/index.htm#ev>

For more information about the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, visit Environment Canada's web site, at [www.ec.gc.ca/envhome.html](http://www.ec.gc.ca/envhome.html) This site also offers tips on "Down to Earth Choices for Sustainable Living."

Additional It's Your Health articles can be found at:

[www.healthcanada.ca/iyh](http://www.healthcanada.ca/iyh)  
You can also call (613) 957-2991