

# Toxic Substances and Environmental Justice



A person places an identifying sticker on a barrel of hazardous waste.

## About Toxic Substances

Toxic substances are present in our day-to-day lives: at work, at home, and in our communities. These substances include the chemicals used in industry or manufacturing and the hazardous waste these processes generate. Many of the consumer products we use also contain toxic chemicals. Toxic chemicals can negatively impact human health and the environment, and certain people and communities are at greater risk of exposure and harm.

Environmental justice will be achieved when all people, regardless of race, national origin, and income enjoy the same degree of protection from environmental and health hazards (like toxic substances). Environmental justice means that all people have equal access to decision-making processes so everyone has a healthy environment in which to live, learn, and work.

## Hazardous waste sites

Polluting industries, including those that generate, store, and transport hazardous waste, are more likely to be in neighborhoods of color and in and around low-income communities.<sup>1</sup> People who already experience social stress from factors like poverty and racism are even more vulnerable when exposed to harmful chemicals.

It is critical that we reduce the amount of hazardous waste located near communities who are at higher risk of negative impacts and already have an unfair share of environmental and social burden. In doing so, we can better protect people and the environment from exposure to dangerous substances.

## What is Ecology doing to help?

As a regulatory agency, we:

- 1) Reduce the amount of toxic chemicals and hazardous waste used and produced by Washington industries.
- 2) Make sure businesses follow Washington laws regarding hazardous waste.
- 3) Manage the cleanup of spill sites around the state.



**Find cleanup sites in your neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>**

## Beauty and personal care products

Personal care products marketed to women of color often contain more toxic ingredients than products

<sup>1</sup> Mascarenhas, M., R. Grattet, and K. Mege. 2021. Toxic waste and race in twenty-first century America. *Environment and Society* (12)1: 108-126. doi.org/10.3167/ares.2021.120107

<sup>2</sup> <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/neighborhood/>

marketed to white women.<sup>3</sup> As a result, women of color, regardless of socioeconomic status, are more frequently exposed to toxic chemicals through these products.

Some of these substances, like phthalates, PFAS, formaldehyde, and heavy metals, are linked to health problems like neurodevelopment issues, fertility issues, and cancer.

### What is Ecology doing to help?

We are concerned about health issues related to personal care products. We are working with community based organizations to inform the public on the latest science, especially in the populations of people who are most negatively affected. We also provide guidance on how to choose safer products through the Safer Products for Washington program.

Additionally, the Toxic Free Cosmetics Act, passed in May of 2023, bans some of the most harmful chemicals found in personal care products. It is the strongest state law in the country to regulate toxic chemicals in beauty and personal care products.



**Learn how to reduce toxic chemicals in your home.<sup>4</sup>**

### Workplace hazards

Environmental justice in the workplace often gets less recognition than other environmental justice concerns. Black and brown workers are more likely to be exposed to hazardous materials than white workers.<sup>5</sup> As a result, they are at greater risk of injury, illness, and death. Certain professions, like beautician services, janitorial services, or factory work, expose workers to a larger amount of toxic

chemicals. These jobs may require employees to use or handle harsh industrial products.

### What is Ecology doing to help?

We prioritize working with businesses located in communities that are at high risk of exposure to toxic substances. We help these businesses replace harmful chemicals with safer substitutes. For example, our Product Replacement Program provides stipends and technical assistance to businesses that switch their equipment and processes to safer alternatives.

We also inspect businesses to make sure they follow state regulations for handling, storing, and transporting hazardous waste. These approaches help reduce worker exposure to toxic chemicals and hazardous waste.



**Learn how businesses can use fewer toxic chemicals.<sup>6</sup>**

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### ADA accessibility

To request an ADA accommodation, contact Ecology by phone at 360-407-6700 or email [hwtrpubs@ecy.wa.gov](mailto:hwtrpubs@ecy.wa.gov), or visit <https://ecology.wa.gov/accessibility>. For Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341.

<sup>3</sup> Zota, A. and B. Shamasunder. 2017. The environmental injustice of beauty: framing chemical exposures from beauty products as a health disparities concern. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 217(4) 418.e1-418.e6. doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2017.07.020

<sup>4</sup> <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/2104036.html>

<sup>5</sup> Peckham, T. and S. Stephan-Recaido (Hazardous Waste Program in King County). 2023. Estimating the burden of occupational exposures in King County among all workers and by race/ethnicity: A job-exposure matrix-based approach.

<sup>6</sup> <https://ecology.wa.gov/ProductReplacement>