



# THE COLLABORATIVE ON HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT - WASHINGTON



## RESEARCH AND INFORMATION WORKING GROUP

### BIRTH DEFECTS

#### FACT SHEETS ON HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT IN WASHINGTON

##### INTRODUCTION

About 3% of babies in the United States have birth defects.<sup>1</sup> About 150,000 babies are born each year with birth defects.<sup>2</sup>

Some environmental contaminants are associated with birth defects, such as hypospadias (an abnormality of the penis), oral clefts and spina bifida.

Most birth defects are caused by a mix of environmental, genetic and lifestyle factors.<sup>3</sup> The exact causes of about 60-70% of birth defects are not known.

##### PROPORTION OF BIRTH DEFECTS DUE TO ENVIRONMENTAL CONTAMINANTS

The World Health Organization has estimated that 5% of all birth defects are due to the environment.<sup>4</sup>

##### BIRTH DEFECTS IN WASHINGTON STATE

- Birth defects accounted for about 1 in 4 infant deaths in Washington in 2002.<sup>5</sup>
- An estimated 2,400 - 3,200 Washington children are diagnosed with birth defects every year.<sup>6</sup> Birth defects must be reported to the Washington State Department of Health.
- About 800 babies are born with heart defects or congenital heart disease every year in Washington state.<sup>7,8</sup>
- About 200 male babies are born with hypospadias (an abnormality of the penis) every year in Washington state.<sup>8,9</sup>
- High rates of neural tube defects were found in counties near the Hanford nuclear energy site near Richland, Washington.<sup>10</sup>

- Mothers who smoke increase their babies' risk of congenital urinary tract abnormalities<sup>11</sup> and asthma.<sup>12</sup>
- Birth defects in Washington state caused by environmental contaminants cost between \$4.2 and \$10.9 million annually (in 2004 dollars), including direct health care and indirect costs.<sup>13</sup> The estimated lifetime costs for children born each year in the US with a significant birth defect are about \$8 billion (in 1992 dollars).<sup>14</sup>
- Lead, mercury, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), alcohol, manganese, pesticides and tobacco smoke are linked with neurological birth defects. Lead, dioxins, PCBs and polybrominated biphenyls (PBBs) are linked with immune system defects.<sup>15</sup>

## COMPARING WASHINGTON STATE NATIONALLY

In 2004, birth defects accounted for about 1 in 5 infant deaths in the United States. The rate for Washington was 1 in 4. Hawaii had the lowest rate, with 1 in 8 infant deaths due to birth defects. Washington, D.C.; Mississippi; South Carolina and Vermont had rates of 1 in 7. Alaska and Idaho had rates of 1 in 3.<sup>16</sup>

In 2003, the Washington State Birth Defect registry received a "D" grade from the Trust for America's Health.<sup>17</sup> Only eight states got a worse rating. This means that Washington does not have a good birth defect registry.

## SOURCES

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