



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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CAP: Ban air fresheners and fragrances in public places

The Consumers Association of Penang calls on the authorities to promulgate laws to ban the use of fragrances in public places as it is hazardous to health. The ban should include the use of air freshener and perfume.

Driven by advertisements that promote scented environments as clean and healthy, it is common to find air fresheners being used in public places such as at airports, restaurants, shopping malls, meeting rooms and banquet halls. Despite their popularity, there are concerns that these products increase indoor air pollution and pose a health risk, especially with long-term exposure.

According to the US Academy of Sciences, 95% of the chemicals used in fragrances are synthetic compounds derived from petroleum. They include known toxins capable of causing cancer, birth defects central nervous system disorders and allergic reactions.

Air fresheners may use chemicals called phthalates that can cause hormonal abnormalities, birth defects, and reproductive problems.

Phthalates (a group of toxic plasticizers) are used in air fresheners to dissolve and carry the smell of fragrances. The use of air fresheners releases the phthalates into the air. They may then be inhaled, or the aerosol particles may land on the skin and be absorbed. Once these chemicals enter the bloodstream, they can alter hormone levels and cause health problems.

Numerous animal studies have linked prenatal exposure to certain phthalates with decreases in testosterone, malformations of the genitalia, and reduced sperm production.

In humans, phthalates have been associated with changes in hormone levels, poor semen quality, and changes in genital development. Phthalate exposure in indoor environments has also been associated with allergic symptoms and asthma. As there are no labelling requirements and even “natural” products can contain toxic chemicals, it is virtually impossible for the average consumer to know which products may pose a risk.

Besides phthalates, air fresheners release volatile organic compounds (VOCs) into the air. VOC turns into a vapour or gas easily at room temperature and are known to cause health problems. Secondary pollutants are also formed when a product’s chemicals combine with the ozone present in the air.

Studies have shown that, fewer than 10% of all volatile ingredients are typically disclosed on air freshener labels or material safety data sheets. Air fresheners are the primary source of volatile organic compounds causing indoor air pollution.

Air fresheners are air pollutants. They do not 'purify' the surrounding air and they also do not add 'natural' fragrances. Some of these air fresheners even coat the nasal passages with an oily film or by releasing nerve-deadening agents to drown out smells.

Even so-called green and organic air fresheners can emit hazardous air pollutants. Air freshener ingredients are largely unknown and undisclosed, owing to intellectual protection which allows companies to hide their formulations.

Unintentional injuries have also been reported with these products, including burns when flammable air fresheners have been ignited by a nearby flame.

Consumers should have the right to clean air; they should not be imposed to breathe in air that is tainted with artificial fragrances and other toxic chemicals. Presently there are laws to ban smoking in public places, similar laws should be applied as artificial fragrance oils contained chemicals that are the same as in cigarette smoke. Consumers should avoid using air fresheners especially in places where there are children or pregnant women.

Besides air fresheners, artificial scent in public places is a nuisance as individuals with allergies and chemical sensitivities are unable to go to places such as movie theatres and shopping malls. Individuals who wear the fragrances want to be noticed and end up giving a headache or migraine to people around them. As in the case of tobacco, breathing someone else's perfume is not a choice as it is impossible to avoid the toxic fragrance in the air.

Similar hazards hide in a wide range of fragranced consumer products like shampoos soap, baby products, deodorant, aftershave, makeup, laundry products, household cleaners, candles and toys. Meanwhile consumers are advised to:

- avoid the use of air fresheners as they are pollutants which masks poor air quality and worsens it.
- choose products with no added fragrance to reduce the exposure to toxic chemicals.
- read ingredient labels to check whether they contain fragrances and even products advertised as "unscented" or "fragrance free" may contain VOCs.

In view of the hazards associated with fragrances, the Consumers Association of Penang calls on the authorities to promulgate laws to ban the use of air fresheners and fragrances in public places.

As fragrances are known to contain harmful chemicals this will be a way to reduce toxic chemical exposure to consumers.

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