



# Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பிளாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

Websites:  
[www.consumer.org.my](http://www.consumer.org.my)

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109  
email: [consumerofpenang@gmail.com](mailto:consumerofpenang@gmail.com)

**Letter to the Editor**

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## **CAP: Malaysians in Dire Need of Clean Air**

In March this year, some 2,775 people fell ill from exposure to toxic fumes in Pasir Gudang. They suffered from breathing difficulties, chest pain and vomiting. 200 people including school children were hospitalised, 111 schools were shut down temporarily.

Fire and rescue officials identified at least 15 different types of chemicals, including the colourless and extremely poisonous hydrogen cyanide in the fumes. The Johor government was left with a cleaning bill which exceeded RM6 million.

In June more than 400 schools in Johor are closed after 75 students experienced breathing difficulties and vomiting.

Even though both incidences happened in Pasir Gudang Johor, the authorities said that the incidences are not linked.

In the latest incident in July, 283 primary students from a primary school in Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan were exposed to pesticide poisoning.

According to a media report they were exposed to *Malathion* pesticide, which is a form of organophosphate, from a nearby farm. The farm which was operating near the school, employed unskilled workers to spray the pesticides

The recent spate of reports pertaining to air pollution should not be taken lightly by Malaysians.

Recent studies have shown that air pollution can cause as many or more deaths in Malaysia as road accidents. This “killer” is not as dramatic or visible as car crashes, but is even more dangerous as it penetrates and contaminates our vital organs, leading to serious diseases and thousands of death. Pollution kills and debilitates.

In comparison with other forms of pollution, air pollution is the most insidious, as we are breathing air throughout our lives and if the air is polluted we have no choice but to breathe in all that invisible pollution along with the oxygen that we need to survive.

Air Pollution can also affect us psychologically. A team of researchers at the National University of Singapore’s Business School has studied the effects of air pollution on productivity at work. According to their finding: prolonged exposure to increased air pollution makes us perform worse at work. “Not only does air pollution negatively affect levels of oxygen and glucose in the blood, both of which affect

self-control, it can also drain our self-control resources psychologically, causing insomnia, anxiety or depression,” writes Sam Yam Kai Chi, an assistant professor of management and organization.

Being exposed to high levels of airborne pollutants has an adverse effect on our lives from cradle to the grave. Literally from the cradle. According to UNICEF, an agency of the United Nations, toxic smog in overpopulated metropolises can harm the developing brain of newborns and infants.

According to UNICEF’s executive director Anthony Lake pollutants not only harm babies’ developing lungs but it can permanently damage their developing brains and thus their future.

Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General said *"A polluted environment is a deadly one – particularly for young children. Their developing organs and immune systems, and smaller bodies and airways, make them especially vulnerable to dirty air and water."*

Harmful exposures can start in the mother’s womb and increase the risk of premature birth. Additionally, when infants and pre-schoolers are exposed to indoor and outdoor air pollution and second-hand smoke they have an increased risk of pneumonia in childhood, and a lifelong increased risk of chronic respiratory diseases, such as asthma. Exposure to air pollution may also increase their lifelong risk of heart disease, stroke and cancer.

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) which is part of the World Health Organisation has classified outdoor air pollution as a cancer-causing agent.

Besides enduring air pollution from factories, farms, cars and other sources, Malaysians have been enduring the effects of the annual “haze” caused by burning in forest and agriculture areas in Indonesia.

The number air-pollution related deaths worldwide due to ischaemic heart diseases and strokes were 72%, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or acute lower respiratory infections 14% and lung cancer 14%.

Though the serious environmental effects of air pollution are well known, the public is often unaware of the factors or sources causing them. We are only at the starting phase of understanding the huge health problem it causes.

Given the above situation the authorities should:

- > Improve the monitoring of air pollution indexes
- > Identify the causes of the pollution and take action to eliminate or reduce them.

**Mohideen Abdul Kader**  
**Acting President**  
**Consumers Association of Penang**