

The Hidden Health Risks of Air Fresheners

Air fresheners are products designed to mask odors or change the scent of the air. Air fresheners come in various forms, including sprays, plug-in devices, scented gel or gel beads, scented candles, or incense. Some people also simmer chemicals, such as scented cleaning products, on the stove. People may use air fresheners to mask unpleasant odors, because they enjoy the scent, or for ritual or religious reasons.

Most air fresheners use chemicals to create artificial scents, but these ingredients may not be listed on the label. The health effects of many of the chemicals used in air fresheners have not been thoroughly tested for health impacts.

The federal government does not require that manufacturers reveal the ingredients used in air fresheners. Some states, like California, do require disclosure of ingredients to a state database, but do not require ingredients to be listed on the product. This makes it hard for consumers to know if there are harmful ingredients.

How can air freshener chemicals get into you?

Air fresheners can release chemicals into the air, which you can then breathe in. When you are smelling an air freshener, you are breathing the chemicals into your body. These chemicals in the air can also settle into the dust in your home, which you can then breathe in or accidentally ingest. Air freshener chemicals can also be absorbed through your skin.

The health effects of chemicals in air fresheners

Research has linked chemicals used in air fresheners to a range of health concerns including:

- Asthma attacks and other respiratory issues
- Headaches and migraines
- Skin irritation (dermatitis)
- Hormone disruption and reduced fertility
- Impaired development of children's bodies

Children and people with asthma or allergies may be particularly vulnerable, especially if they have regular or long-term exposure.

Phthalates (pronounced "thal-ates"), a group of chemicals commonly used in air fresheners to help them hold fragrance and color, have been linked to many health concerns. Certain phthalates can harm the development of the reproductive system, especially in boys, and affect fertility in adults. Some phthalates are suspected of increasing the risk of cancer. Phthalates may contribute to allergies and asthma. You can be exposed to these chemicals by using air fresheners.

Are all air fresheners harmful?

No. Some air fresheners use safer ingredients. However, be aware of greenwashing – even products labeled "natural" or "green" can still contain harmful chemicals. Look for products with plant-based

ingredients.

How to prevent odors in your home

If you are using air fresheners to mask other odors in the home, you should know that air fresheners do not remove odors – they just cover them up. Try to prevent odors before they start:

- Take out trash regularly.
- Clean spills, pet areas, and bathrooms frequently with unscented products.
- Keep your home well-ventilated.
- Reduce excess moisture with a dehumidifier or exhaust fan to prevent mildew and mold.

Safe alternatives to air fresheners

Here are some non-toxic, odor-reducing alternatives:

- Opening the windows – for air that feels or smells stale, increase airflow to bring in fresh air.
- Baking soda – neutralizes odors in carpets, furniture, trash, and refrigerators.
- Fresh flowers – flowers add a floral scent without harmful chemicals.
- Potpourri – dried flowers or spices last longer than fresh.
- Simmering natural ingredients in water – add spices like cinnamon or vanilla or cut-up fruit such as lemon and apple to a pot of simmering water. For safety, watch carefully so the water doesn't boil away. Avoid leaving a hot stove unattended.

Frequently Asked Questions

Are candles a safer alternative?

When candles with artificial scents are burned, they can release a variety of chemicals and pollutants into the air. Burning candles can trigger asthma and allergy symptoms. Candles that are made from unscented beeswax or unscented soy are safer candle options. Look for candles with wicks made of natural (untreated) material. All candles put small particles into the air. Make sure to ventilate the space after using candles.

Are essential oils safer?

Essential oils can be a safer alternative. Dilute in water and diffuse into the air or diffuse on reed sticks. Some individuals with allergies or asthma or other respiratory conditions may be sensitive to essential oils. They can also be dangerous to pets.

Is incense safer?

Burning incense releases tiny particles and gases which may worsen the air quality inside of your home. Incense can trigger asthma and increase breathing difficulties. Burning incense is also associated with a higher risk for heart disease and lung cancer, among other risks.