



The Precautionary Principle

The Saying and Action Steps for Community Members

What is the precautionary principle?

Have you ever heard the phrase “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”¹. This is the idea behind the precautionary principle. It helps people and companies decide whether an action should be taken when we do not know whether it may have harmful effects on the environment or the health of people.²

The precautionary principle suggests that when we do not know for certain that there will not be damaging effects from substances, especially those that are persistent and toxic in the environment, it is best to err on the side of precaution. It is **better to prevent exposure, rather than try to clean up** toxins or cure negative health effects after an exposure has occurred.²

Why do we need the precautionary principle?

For many chemicals that we use frequently there is not enough scientific evidence to know for certain what their adverse health effects may be. Until we know for certain that these chemicals are safe, the precautionary principle can be used to avoid exposure. Examples of chemicals that have suspected but not yet certain adverse health impacts include:

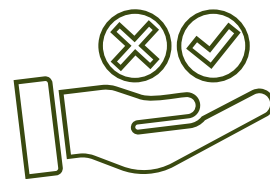
- BPA- (bisphenol A) commonly found in plastics and metal-lined cans³
- PBDEs- (polybrominated diphenyl ethers) commonly found in flame retardant clothing and foams
- Phthalates-commonly found in cosmetics, shower curtains, and wallpaper
- TCE- (trichloroethylene) commonly found in degreasers and paint removers⁴
- PVC- (polyvinyl chloride) commonly found in plastics, particularly in toys⁴
- Pesticides- used in gardening and foods to prevent pests



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How do these decision protect the public from harm?

The precautionary principle encourages and allows decisions makers to make decisions that protect the public and the environment from harm. The precautionary principle also states that the burden of proof that a product or action is safe for people and for the environment should fall to those who are promoting its use.⁵ It should not be up to the people who are exposed to the product or action to prove that it is unsafe or harmful to health.



How does the precautionary principle get applied in practice?

Many chemicals last a long time in the environment once they are released, and may be difficult and expensive to clean up. Therefore, the Precautionary Principle has been applied in a number of important decisions, to protect the environment and health.

Examples of precaution in action:

- Water: When health risks from contaminants are uncertain, regulations often limit them more strictly to offer greater protection.
- Toys: In 2008, major retailers like Wal-Mart, Target, and Toys “R” Us voluntarily reduced PVCs in toys.^{6 7}
- Pesticides: Los Angeles public schools cut back on pesticide use by adopting safer pest control methods.⁸



What does this mean for me and my community?

Your health, and your community’s health, is shaped by things like food access, physical activity, and exposure to harmful substances in the air, water, and home. The Precautionary Principle urges businesses and policymakers to take steps that prevent harm before it happens. You can support this by encouraging them to:

- Clearly label products that may have adverse effects on the health of people, animals and the environment
- Limit actions that may pose risk to human health or the environment, even if that threat has not yet been scientifically established
- Prove that an action or chemical is safe to the environment and will not harm human health before approval.

Please see http://mleead.umich.edu/Coec_Fact_Sheets.php for the citations included in this factsheet.

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