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The hidden enemy

By ROBYN STUBBS, 24 HOURS

"Cancer: An evil influence or corruption spreading uncontrollably."

- Oxford Canadian Dictionary

For its victims, cancer can feel like an evil presence invading their most personal and private space - the body.

And while genetic makeup, individual immune systems, viruses, age and lifestyle choices are all associated with causing cancer, the role of exposure to environmental toxins can't be ignored or downplayed, says Mae Burrows, executive director of the Labour Environmental Alliance Society, a non-profit organization based in Vancouver.

"It's that low dose exposure to toxins over a period of time that we need to be more aware of," she says. "We accept that when it comes to tobacco smoke ... we should be saying that about other products as well."

The Canadian Cancer Society estimates approximately five per cent of cancers are related to environmental and occupational carcinogen exposure, and while determining what causes cancer is complex, current scientific evidence suggests people continually exposed to known or potential environmental carcinogens have a higher risk of developing the disease.

"It's usually a number of exposures over time, and there are some [environmental toxins] that are more clearly related to cancer, like asbestos," says Cathy Adair, vice-president of the Canadian Cancer Society.

But it's not only asbestos that is now undeniably linked to cancer - the Ontario College of Family Physicians has done extensive research in the field of environmental toxins and has determined clear associations between exposure to toxic chemicals, commonly used pesticides and cancer of the brain, liver, prostate, kidney and pancreas, as well as Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and leukemia.

But, whether they're spray-ed on your lawn or in your living room on a stain-resistant sofa treated with fire retardant, toxins wiggle their way into your system in every way possible, including being inhaled through everyday household dust or absorbed through the skin on contact, says Jan Kasperski, CEO of the OCFP.

And not surprisingly, kids are at the most risk for developing illnesses related to toxins that can either cause cancer or interfere with developing hormonal, immune or endocrine systems.

"[Kids] have poorly developed kidneys and livers, so toxins that adults may swiftly eliminate from their systems, kids will contain for a much longer period of time," he says. "And, we simply have so many more toxins now, so over the course of a lifetime, children are more and more exposed."