

CHAPTER 4

Helping women stay healthy

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Helping women stay healthy



A woman who eats well and takes good care of her body is much more likely to have a healthy pregnancy and healthy baby. In fact, the ways to stay healthy listed in this chapter can be used by women and their families to stay well throughout their whole lives.

Eating well

Eating well means eating **enough food** and eating **a variety of healthy foods**.

Eating well:

- helps a woman resist illness and stay healthy.
- keeps a woman's teeth and bones strong.
- gives a woman strength to work.
- helps the baby grow well in the mother's womb.
- helps prevent heavy bleeding after birth.
- helps a mother recover her strength quickly after birth.



Eating well helps a woman and her baby stay healthy and strong.

Problems from poor nutrition (not eating well)



Poor nutrition can cause tiredness, weakness, difficulty fighting infections, and other serious health problems.

Poor nutrition during pregnancy is especially dangerous. It can cause miscarriage (the end of a pregnancy) or cause a baby to be born very small or with disabilities. It also increases the chances of a baby or a mother dying during or after birth.

Talking to women about food

Talk to women about the food they eat. The earlier women start eating healthier foods, the better chance they have to stay healthy, to have safer, easier births, and to have healthy babies.

To find out whether a woman is eating well, ask her what she usually eats, and how much. For example: “What did you eat yesterday?” Be sure to tell her what is healthy about what she eats. Then make a suggestion for how she could eat better.

Even if a woman knows the best foods for health, she may not eat them. Many families cannot afford to buy enough food or a wide variety of foods. Other women simply may not like the taste of some foods. To help a woman eat better, suggest healthy foods that she can and will choose to eat.

I eat cassava every day, and I usually have some fish — or beans cooked with onions and tomatoes, and I drink soda pop.

That sounds good. Cassava gives energy. Beans and fish give strength. If you drink fruit juice instead of soda pop, and you also eat some green vegetables, you will get more vitamins.



Eat more food

Pregnant women and women who are breastfeeding need to eat more than usual. The extra food gives them enough energy and strength, and helps their babies grow.

Some pregnant women feel nauseated and do not want to eat. But pregnant women need to eat enough — even when they do not feel well. Simple foods like chapatis, tortillas, or rice can be easier for these women to eat.

Eat a variety of foods

It is important for pregnant women (like everyone else) to eat different kinds of food: main foods (carbohydrates), grow foods (proteins), glow foods (vitamins and minerals), and go foods (fats, oils, and sugar), along with plenty of fluids.

For a healthier body,
eat many kinds of foods.



Main foods (carbohydrates)

In most parts of the world, people eat one main food at each meal. This main food may be rice, maize, wheat, millet, cassava, taro, plantain, breadfruit, or another low-cost starchy food. These foods give the body energy. But to grow and stay healthy, the body needs other types of food too.

Grow foods (proteins)

Grow foods contain protein, which is needed for the growth of muscles, bones, and strong blood. Everyone needs protein to be healthy and to grow.

Some grow foods high in proteins:

- legumes (beans, peas, and lentils)
- nuts and seeds
- meat, fish, and insects
- eggs
- cheese, milk, and yogurt



Note: Meat, fish, and cheese are nutritious foods but they can carry parasites or disease when they are eaten raw. Pregnant women should only eat fish, meat, or cheese that is well cooked or pasteurized. Fish, especially large fish that eat other fish, can also contain mercury and other poisons from contaminated water.

Glow foods (vitamins and minerals)

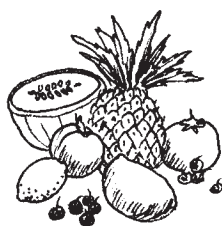
Glow foods contain vitamins and minerals, which help the body fight infection and keep the eyes, skin, and bones healthy and strong.

Fruits and vegetables are high in vitamins and minerals. It is important for women to eat as many different fruits and vegetables as they can.

**Go foods (sugars and fats)**

Go foods contain sugars and fats, which give the body energy. Everyone needs these foods to be healthy.

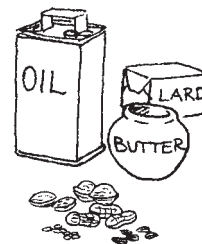
These days, many people eat more sugars and fats than they need. That is because more people drink sugary soda pop, or eat foods that come from packages instead of foods made at home. These packaged, sugary foods are expensive and not as healthy. Too much can damage the teeth or cause diabetes. It is better to eat go foods that are natural, not packaged.

**Some healthy go foods high in sugars:**

- fruit
- honey
- molasses

Some go foods high in fats:

- nuts and seeds
- avocados
- vegetable oil, butter, ghee, and lard
- fatty meat



Eat these 5 important vitamins and minerals every day

Pregnant and breastfeeding women need more of five vitamins and minerals — iron, folic acid, calcium, iodine, and vitamin A — than other people do. A pregnant woman should try to get these vitamins and minerals every day for her own health and because the baby also needs them to grow and be healthy. Every pregnant woman needs enough for the baby and for herself.

Iron

Iron helps make blood healthy and prevents anemia (weak blood, see page 116). A pregnant woman needs a lot of iron to have enough energy, to prevent or survive too much bleeding at the birth, and to make sure that the growing baby has healthy blood for the first few months after birth.

These foods contain a lot of iron:

- meat (especially liver, kidney, and other organ meats)
- poultry (birds)
- grasshoppers, crickets, and termites
- fish, clams, and oysters
- eggs
- beans, peas, and lentils
- sunflower, pumpkin, and squash seeds
- dark green leafy vegetables
- breadfruit
- yams
- hard squash
- blackstrap molasses

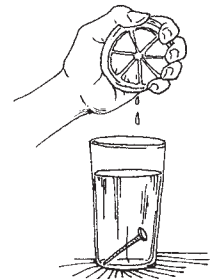


Other ways to get more iron:

- Eat iron foods with citrus fruits or tomatoes. The vitamin C in these foods helps a woman absorb iron into her system.
- Cook food in iron pots or add a clean piece of iron — like an iron nail — to the cooking pot. Only use a nail that you know is made of pure iron, not a mix of metals.
- Put a clean piece of pure iron, like an iron nail, in a little lemon juice for a few hours. Drink the juice mixed with clean water.

It can be difficult for a pregnant woman to get enough iron, even if she eats iron-rich foods every day. If possible, she should also take iron pills or iron syrup. These medicines may be called ferrous sulfate, ferrous gluconate, ferrous fumarate, or other names.

In many places health centers will give iron pills to pregnant women. Sometimes iron pills are combined with folic acid. The iron pills may make it hard for the woman to pass stool (constipation), and her stool may turn black. These problems should get better in a few days. (See page 76.)



Hookworm and malaria can cause anemia

Women with **hookworm** are likely to have anemia. Hookworm can easily be treated with mebendazole or albendazole, though these drugs should not be taken in the first 3 months of pregnancy. These drugs have not been tested enough to be sure that they are safe for women who are in the later months of pregnancy. However, most doctors believe that the benefit of treating hookworm is greater than the possible harm of these medicines.

If hookworm is common in your community, ask your local health authority what treatment is recommended for pregnant women.

Malaria can also cause anemia and other serious problems in pregnancy. See page 98 for how to prevent or treat malaria.

Folic acid (folate)

Lack of folic acid can cause anemia in the mother and severe disabilities in the baby. To prevent these problems, it is most important for a woman to get enough folic acid before she gets pregnant and in the first few months of pregnancy.

These foods contain a lot of folic acid:

- dark green leafy vegetables
- meat (especially liver, kidney, and other organ meats)
- peas and beans
- sunflower, pumpkin, and squash seeds
- whole grains (brown rice, whole wheat)
- fish
- eggs
- mushrooms

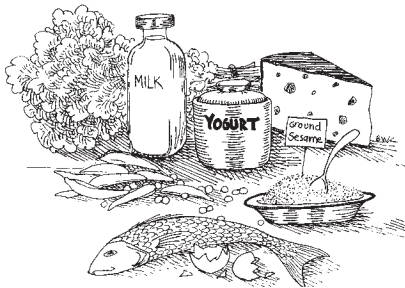


Some women also take folic acid pills.



Folic acid pills

- take 0.4 mg (400 mcg) folic acid.....by mouth, 1 time each day



Calcium

A growing baby needs a lot of calcium to make new bones, especially in the last few months of pregnancy. Women need calcium for strong bones and teeth.

These foods contain a lot of calcium:

- milk, curd, yogurt, and cheese
- ground sesame (tahini)
- almonds
- green leafy vegetables
- yellow vegetables (hard squash, yams)
- shellfish
- lime (carbon ash)
- bone meal and eggshells

Women can also get more calcium in these ways:

- Soak bones or eggshells in vinegar or lemon juice for a few hours. Then use the liquid to make soup or eat with other foods.
- Add lemon juice, vinegar, or tomatoes when cooking bones.
- Grind eggshells into a fine powder and mix into food.
- Soak maize in lime (carbon ash) before cooking it.



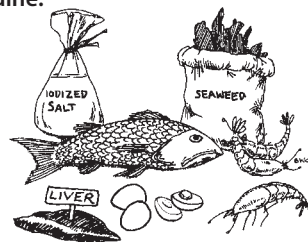
Iodine

Iodine prevents goiter (swelling of the throat) and other problems in adults. Lack of iodine in a pregnant woman can cause her child to have hypothyroidism (cretinism), a disability that affects thinking and brain development.

The easiest way to get enough iodine is to use iodized salt instead of regular salt.

These foods contain a lot of iodine:

- shellfish (like shrimp)
- fish
- seaweed
- egg yolks
- liver



If hypothyroidism or goiter are common in your area, find out if the local health ministry will give iodized oil by mouth or iodine by injection. If not, women can make iodine solution at home with polyvidone iodine.

To make an iodine solution to drink

Add 1 drop of Lugol's iodine to 1 glass of clean drinking water or milk.



In places where goiter or hypothyroidism are common, everyone except breastfeeding babies should drink 1 glass of this iodine solution every month of his or her life. This is especially important for children and pregnant women. Do not take more iodine than this. Too much is dangerous.

Store iodine at room temperature, and in dark containers to protect it from light.

Vitamin A

Vitamin A prevents night blindness and helps fight infections. Lack of vitamin A also causes blindness in children. A woman needs to eat plenty of vitamin A during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.



Dark yellow and green leafy vegetables and yellow fruits have vitamin A.



Along with eating healthy foods, women should drink plenty of clean water and other fluids every day. Fruit juices, coconut water, animal milks, and many herbal teas are all healthy fluids to drink.

Ideas about food affect women's health

Some beliefs about foods are harmful — especially when people believe that women should not eat as much as men do, or should not eat a variety of foods.

It is not safe for girls to be fed less than boys

Girls need as much food as boys — to grow and learn and work. If a girl does not get enough food, her bones may not grow well. This can cause serious problems during labor after the girl has become a woman and has a baby.

When a woman must feed her family first, she may not get enough to eat

A woman may be taught to feed her family before herself. She eats only what is left and often does not get as much as others in the family. This is never healthy. And when a woman is pregnant, has HIV, or has just had a baby, it can be very dangerous.

If the family will not help the woman eat enough, she may need to hide food, eat while she is cooking, or eat while her husband is out of the house.



Packaged and processed foods are rarely as good as homemade

People are eating more and more packaged and processed foods. Some people like the taste, and some people think that packaged foods are healthier.

Packaged foods may be advertised as the healthiest choice, but this is rarely the truth! Advertisers will say anything just to sell products. Some packaged foods are fortified with vitamins and minerals, but our bodies cannot use these added-on vitamins as well as our bodies use the vitamins that we get from eating whole, fresh foods. Most packaged foods contain more sugar, salt, and fat than we need. Many are full of chemicals to keep the food looking and tasting fresh, and some of these chemicals have not been carefully tested to be sure of their safety.

Avoiding foods can be dangerous

In many places, pregnant women are told not to eat certain foods. In these communities, people believe that these foods will harm the baby. At the same time, a doctor or a midwife may tell a woman it is important to eat those same foods. This can be confusing for the woman.

Avoiding foods can be dangerous. For a woman to be healthy during and after pregnancy, she must eat a wide variety of foods — main foods, grow foods, glow foods, and go foods. Eating only one kind of food is not enough.

If a woman does choose to avoid certain foods, make sure she is getting enough of each kind of food, and enough vitamins and minerals from her food.

Everyone needs to eat a wide variety of foods.



Finding creative answers

Beliefs about food can be hard to change. But you may find ways to help women eat better without working against their beliefs. This example is based on a true story:



Maria is a midwife in Guatemala. She and her people believe that some foods are “hot” foods, and some foods are “cold” foods. They believe that pregnant women should not eat cold foods.

To Maria and her people, beans and eggs are cold foods (even when they are cooked). But Maria knows that beans and eggs are good, low-cost ways for pregnant women to get the protein and iron they need.

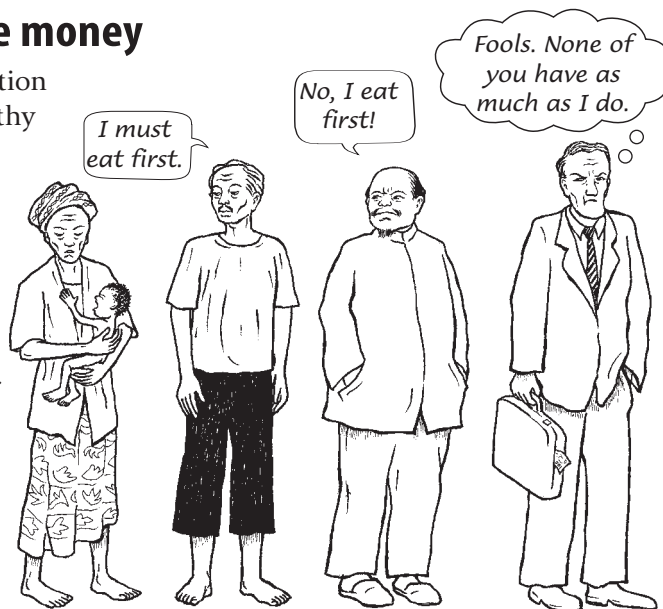
Maria wants pregnant women to eat well, but they will not eat cold foods. And Maria too thinks that cold foods may not be good for pregnant women to eat. Her solution is simple and smart. She tells pregnant women to eat beans and eggs with a little hot pepper or another hot food. This way, the foods will not be cold anymore.

Maria has found a creative answer to a problem. She has found a way for pregnant women to eat better and has shown respect for the beliefs of her community.

Eating well with little money

The biggest cause of poor nutrition is poverty. Rich people in wealthy countries can buy any foods they want, while those in poor communities cannot. And within each community, some can afford to eat better than others. A few people own most of the land or businesses, and make money off of the work of others. Even within each family, a father may eat better than his wife or children.

To learn more about the root causes of poverty and ways to work for change, see the books *Where There Is No Doctor* and *Helping Health Workers Learn*.



The problems of hunger and poor nutrition will not be solved until we all share with each other fairly.



Even a very poor family can eat better by spending money wisely. A father who buys alcohol and tobacco could instead buy nutritious food or he could buy a hen to lay eggs. A mother who buys her children sweets or soda pop could instead buy eggs, beans, or other low-cost healthful foods.

Here are some ideas that families can use to eat better with little money:

Breast milk

Breast milk costs nothing, and has all the nutrition a baby needs. Young children do not need fortified milks — especially if they are still breastfeeding and eating other foods.

Beans, peas, and lentils

Beans and other legumes have a lot of protein and vitamins, and they usually do not cost much. They have even more vitamins if they are sprouted before being eaten.

Planting legumes makes soil richer. Other crops will grow better in a field where legumes once grew.



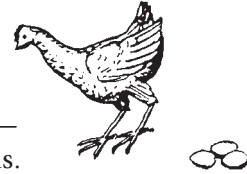
Grow beans this year.



Next year, maize.

Less expensive meats and animal products

Blood and organ meats like liver, heart, and kidney have a lot of iron and may cost less than other meats. Fish and chicken are as healthy as other meats, and usually cost less — especially for a family that fishes or raises their own chickens.



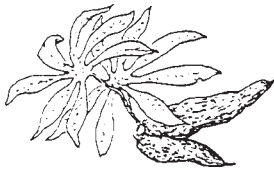
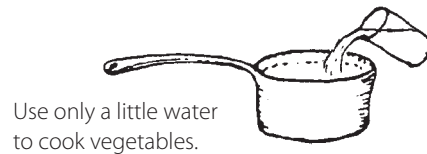
Eggs have a lot of protein, iron, and vitamin A. Eggs give more protein for less money than almost any other food.

Whole grains

Grains, like wheat, rice, and corn, are more nutritious when they have not been refined (processed to take out the color). Taking out the color takes out healthy things too. White bread and white rice have less vitamins, minerals, and proteins than brown bread or brown rice.

Vegetables and fruits

When vegetables are boiled or steamed, some of the vitamins from the foods go into the cooking water. Use this water to make soups.



The outside leaves of plants are usually thrown away, but sometimes they can be eaten. The leaves of the cassava plant have more vitamins and protein than the root.

Many wild fruits and berries are rich in vitamins and natural sugars that give energy.

Avoid buying vitamins

Most of the time people can get enough vitamins and minerals by eating a variety of foods. Buying vitamins is usually a waste of money.

But pregnancy and breastfeeding are times that women may need to take extra vitamins — more than what they can get from food. Vitamin pills work as well as vitamin injections, and cost less.

Caring for the body for good health

For a woman to stay healthy in pregnancy — or anytime — it is wise for her to keep clean, exercise, and get plenty of rest.

Keep clean

Keeping the body clean helps prevent infections. If possible, the mother should regularly wash her body, including her genitals, with clean water.

Care for the teeth and mouth

Healthy teeth help a person's whole body be healthy, and care for the teeth is especially important in pregnancy because unhealthy teeth can lead to gum infections. This can cause a baby to be born too early.

In some places there is a saying, "Have a baby, lose a tooth." But this does not have to be true! A woman can protect her teeth in these ways:

- Eat calcium-rich foods.
- Avoid sweets, candy, and soda pop.
- Clean the teeth after every meal with a soft brush, tooth stick, or rough cloth. Toothpaste, salt, or plain water on the brush are helpful but not necessary.

To make a tooth-cleaning stick:

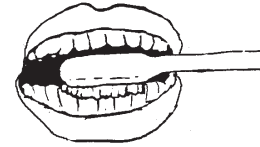


Sharpen this end to clean between the teeth.

Chew on this end and use the fibers as a brush.



Or tie a piece of rough cloth on the end of a stick.



Clean the surfaces of all the teeth, between the teeth, and the gums every day.

If possible, everyone should see a dentist or dental worker regularly.

Exercise

Exercise makes a woman's body stronger. During pregnancy, exercise helps her body get ready for labor and birth. Exercise can also help a woman have energy, feel happy, and sleep well.

Many women get all the exercise they need by hauling water, working in the fields, milling grain, chasing after children, and walking up and down hills.

Women who work sitting or standing (in offices, stores, or factories, for example) or who do not move around much during the day usually need more exercise. They can take long walks, dance, do physical work, or find another way to move.



Squeezing exercise (Kegels)

The squeezing exercise strengthens muscles in the pelvis and vagina. Doing the squeezing exercise can help to:

- prevent leaking urine.
- prevent the vagina from tearing during birth.
- speed healing after birth.
- increase sexual pleasure.

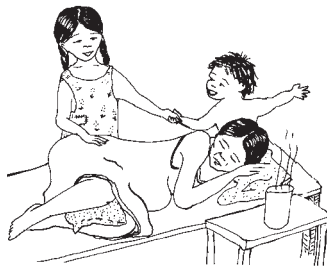
A woman can learn this exercise while she is urinating. As the urine comes out, she should squeeze the muscles in her vagina until the urine stops. Once she learns how to squeeze these muscles, she should only do it when she is not urinating.

The squeezing exercise is helpful at all times, not just during pregnancy. If possible, women should practice at least 4 times a day, doing at least 10 squeezes each time.



Sleep, rest, and relax

Sleep and rest help women stay strong and resist sickness. Getting enough rest also helps prevent high blood pressure, sick babies, and other problems.



Many women must work all day in fields, factories, or stores. Then they must also haul water, find fuel, mill grain, cook, clean, and care for their families. This can be very hard at any time. It can be especially hard for pregnant women who need more rest than usual.

Explain to pregnant women that it is important for them to rest for a few minutes every 1 or 2 hours. Help the woman's family understand why it is important for her to rest and sleep.

Enjoy the pregnancy

If women have enough food, rest, and care, pregnancy can be a wonderful time.

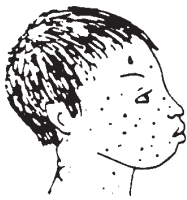
Many communities have rituals and practices that honor a pregnant woman. People help her with her work, bring her special foods, or give her massages or gifts. Customs like these help a woman get the food and rest she needs, and help her feel good about herself and her pregnancy.



Things to avoid during pregnancy and breastfeeding

Sicknesses, drugs, and poisonous chemicals are not healthy for anyone. They are particularly dangerous throughout pregnancy, especially while breastfeeding and during the first 3 months of pregnancy. For more on avoiding other serious illnesses, see pages 97 to 102, and Chapter 18.

Stay away from people with rubella and other sicknesses



Stay away from people with sicknesses or rashes during pregnancy.

It is best for someone who is pregnant to stay away from people who are sick, to avoid becoming sick themselves.

Some sicknesses are particularly dangerous to pregnant women or their babies. Rubella (German measles) is one sickness that can cause serious disabilities in the baby, including deafness and heart problems, and can even cause death.

Avoid taking unnecessary medicines

When a woman takes medicines, they pass through her blood to her baby. Medicines that are safe for a grown woman or even a child can be dangerous to a developing baby. But some medicines, especially ART medicines for HIV, are necessary to keep a developing baby healthy.

Cough syrups, pain relievers, modern medicines, and plant medicines may all be dangerous. Some of them can cause disabilities in the baby, including disabilities that affect thinking or the brain.

If possible, pregnant women and women who are breastfeeding should not take medicines. If a woman is sick and needs medicine, find out if this medicine is safe in pregnancy or while breastfeeding. Look in the Medicines Pages at the end of this book (see page 467) or ask a doctor if the medicine is safe. If plant medicines are used in your community, try to learn which ones are safe during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Most of the medicines we recommend in this book are safe to take during pregnancy or breastfeeding. (If they are not safe, we will include a warning about when they can be dangerous.) But even drugs that are safe should only be taken when they are truly needed. Rest, water, and healthful foods are often enough to cure sicknesses and other problems.



Pregnant women should only take medicines that are safe in pregnancy and that are truly needed.

Avoid smoking, alcohol, and other drugs

Cigarette smoke, alcohol, and other drugs are all harmful to the mother. When a woman smokes, drinks, or takes drugs, they also pass through her blood to her baby.

Smoking is dangerous for anyone. It can lead to serious problems including cancer. When a pregnant woman smokes, or even when she breathes the smoke from someone near her, her blood vessels get smaller and do not carry as much air or food to her baby. Because of this, babies of women who smoke are more likely to be small or sick.

Drinking a lot of alcohol can be dangerous for anyone. Heavy drinking can lead to many illnesses including serious problems of the liver. When a pregnant woman drinks, even just 1 or 2 drinks a day, her baby can have disabilities that affect the brain.

Some drugs, particularly opium, heroin, cocaine, and barbiturates, are very addictive and dangerous. When a pregnant woman takes these drugs, her baby can be born with a drug addiction or with other serious health problems.

If you work with a woman who may be addicted to alcohol or other drugs, try to find help for her. She may be able to stop if she understands the risks to her and her baby. Advise her to stay away from people who are smoking, drinking, or taking drugs.

You may be able to help her find others in your community who have stopped using alcohol or drugs and who meet to support each other. The book *Where Women Have No Doctor* has more ideas about how to help someone stop abusing alcohol and drugs.



Whatever a mother puts into her body passes to her baby.



Stay away from chemicals and fumes

Strong chemicals used for cleaning, and poisons used to kill pests in the fields or at home, are dangerous for everyone. They are especially dangerous to women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. These chemicals can cause miscarriage, infertility, cancer, and disabilities in the baby.

Any chemical with a strong smell is probably not safe. Many dangerous chemicals have no smell at all.

If possible, everyone should avoid these dangerous chemicals. But a pregnant woman should have no contact with them. She should not use them herself or breathe chemical fumes or dust. Her family should not store food in containers that once had chemicals inside. Tiny amounts of the chemicals may be left in the container even after it is washed — enough to harm a person's health!

Families should try not to use chemicals at all. But many people who work with chemicals have no choice. It is part of their job at a factory, on a farm, cleaning, or somewhere else. People who use chemicals at work may be able to talk to the other workers about the problem. Maybe all the workers together can talk to the owner about using fewer chemicals or using safer ones.

Poisonous chemicals include:

- pesticides (chemicals that kill bugs or weeds) used in farming
- pesticides used at home to kill bugs or rodents
- strong cleaners and solvents
- some kinds of glue and paint
- gasoline, oil, and other fuels



If someone in the family must work with chemicals, they should:

- use as few chemicals, and as little of each one, as possible.
- keep chemicals away from places where food is stored.
- keep chemicals away from children.
- avoid breathing chemicals. Wear a mask or at least cover the mouth and nose, and try to work where there is a good air flow.
- avoid getting chemicals on the skin. Wear gloves, long sleeves, and closed shoes.
- after working with chemicals, change clothes before coming in the house. Pregnant women should not wash these clothes.