Our Breath Causes Cancer. Really?

Of course not. EPA's revised draft IRIS assessment must be scientifically sound and pass a reality check!

Formaldehyde is one of the most studied chemicals in use today and more than 40 years of advanced science and practical experience clearly indicates there is a safe exposure level.

Several regulatory and scientific agencies have used the rich body of biologically-based evidence to establish levels that are protective of human health. According to the extensive body of research, the weight of evidence clearly indicates that formaldehyde poses negligible long-term risk at environmentally relevant exposure levels.¹

Unfortunately, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 2010 draft Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS) assessment proposed risk value would set an acceptable air concentration that is thousands of times below levels that naturally occur in the environment (see figure below).

EPA's proposed 2010 risk value even suggests that human breath poses an unacceptable risk of cancer. The truth is, formaldehyde is a natural part of our world and the illogical findings of IRIS are not. Formaldehyde is found in every living system – from plants to animals to humans – produced as part of our normal metabolic process. If a person inhales formaldehyde, the body breaks it down rapidly, just like when it is naturally produced in our bodies.

Given this information and a review of relevant science, groups like the World Health Organization have set realistic, protective air guidelines at or around 80 parts per billion (ppb).

The public needs to have confidence that EPA, too, will set acceptable levels that are also based on relevant, best available science. Any revised draft IRIS assessment must be scientifically defensible and practical - so that "safe limits" are not unreasonably set below naturally occurring background levels.

1. e.g. Rhomberg 2011; Swenberg et al. 2013, Nielsen et al. 2016; Mundt et al. 2017

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