

Take It Personally

By Mary Brune

On my way into work last Friday, I heard a story on NPR about a UCSF study that had found dozens of toxic chemicals in the bodies of pregnant women. I've written before about the vulnerable environment of the womb, and while I'm not surprised by the findings of this latest report, its release struck a nerve nonetheless.

You see, until the previous day, I had been a pregnant woman, early in the first trimester with what would have been my third child.

Miscarriages occur far too frequently and impact far too many women. The worst part, perhaps, is not having an answer as to why they happen. When I found out I was pregnant, I immediately took all the advised precautions: cut out alcohol, coffee; I ate well, exercised, and took my prenatal vitamins. As far as monitoring what went into my body, I did everything right. What I couldn't control, however, was the likely presence of toxic chemicals already inside my body. Chemicals like pesticides, flame retardants, BPA—all of which are known to have negative affects on reproduction. Chemicals that could have interfered with my pregnancy.

While I can't say for sure that there was a causal relationship between my own chemical exposures and the loss of this pregnancy, I also can't be sure that there wasn't. The truth is I'll never know. But I'll always wonder, and I shouldn't have to.

I'm sharing this very personal story because pregnancy loss—and its potential causes— is a subject that people don't talk about *enough*. It's easy to explain away these early losses as simple bad luck, when we need to be examining the connections between environmental exposures and negative reproductive outcomes like miscarriage.

It's quite an emotional ride to go from a positive pregnancy test to a bloody bathroom stall. I would guess that even the most cautious of women, the ones who wait to share news of their pregnancies until the most risky period is over, nevertheless find themselves daydreaming about this new life they carry. I certainly did. I imagined future camping trips, visits with the grandparents, building sandcastles on the beach. And in the space of a few minutes, all of those feelings of anticipation, hope, and happiness were replaced with feelings of devastation, emptiness, and anger.

A few days have passed since the incident. In that time, the sharp edges of the loss have become blunted. That's not to say that this loss will be easily wiped away and forgotten. It won't. I will carry it with me forever. It has become one more thread in the fabric of who I am. The next time I'm sitting in a doctor's office filling out forms and I'm asked for an accounting of my reproductive history, I will now write 3 in the box for miscarriage. This loss, this period of grief, has become a dot on the timeline of my life.

I don't want to linger too long, however, on thoughts of what might have been. The mother in me wants to shift my focus to the other stat on the form. Number of live births: 2. My creative, kind, funny, generous, crazy-smart daughter; my tender and tough little boy, full of laughter and surprising passion. The sum of them both causes my cup of maternal blessings to overflow. As unlucky as I am to be among the one in six women who experiences pregnancy loss, I am blessed a thousand times over to have two* children who are healthy, happy, and who give my life a sense of purpose.

It's also the mother in me that tells the *activist* in me that it's time to get back to work. The UCSF report shines a blazing light on the need for real chemical policy reform in this country. Toxic chemicals have no business being in our wombs.

Efforts to reform the outdated Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) have stalled in Congress, and there are indications that a new bill, one written by the chemical industry, will rear its head sometime this session. We expect the true origins of the bill to be well-hidden, under the guise of having "grassroots support".

Don't be fooled. For the real details on the bill, look to trusted sources like The Center for Environmental Health (CEH), and the Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families coalition. Let's be proactive. Contact your member of Congress, tell them you want real chemical policy reform, right now. It's time for all of us to take this issue personally.

*[*Author's Note: The number of live births on that form would now read 3. My second daughter was born in 2012.]*