Rheumatologist's Guide To A Toxin-Free Childhood: Protecting Kids From Environmental Hazards Transcript

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Introduction to toxins and practical control

Welcome back to ADHD, Autism and Chronic Disease Parenting Summit. I'm here with Aly Cohen, the amazing integrative rheumatologist and also the bestselling author of Nontoxic Guide to Living Healthy in a Chemical World.

So I'm super excited to chat with you today about toxins. It's a big topic, and, we're talking about a lot throughout, the summit, but not really with a rheumatologist, certainly.

And they're it's such a big topic. So I'm excited to chat with you and dive into this a little deeper. Yeah. Well, thank you for having me and your audience.

Thanks for listening in. I hope to, you know, share some really practical information. And, you know, we we have a big problem with environmental chemicals, I think most of us instinctually as humans, but I guess maybe more so as parents.

I was a you know, a parent with young kids at one point. I now have teenagers that bossed me around, but at the time that they were little, I had a lot more control over their food, their environment.

And that made a big difference. And so I think that that's what we all like to hold on to is what we can control. It's kind of like the Serenity Prayer.

And then really try to focus on on that as opposed to things that are really more daunting, things like, you know, maybe air pollution outside your home.

But, but I like to write about, teach and share on the smart human, which is my platform, you know, really practical ways to, to really harness what we can do and what actually makes a difference physiologically.

And also in terms of, reducing risk for harm, which includes not just acute issues like maybe asthma exacerbation, if you have, you know, chemicals in your home, products that might trade off.

But to really long term risk, you know, what are the risks of, you know, developing heart disease or even cancers or, even autoimmune diseases? So there's the short term goals and there's long term goals, but a lot of it has to do with just very practical choices, smarter decisions.

And, it's actually cheaper usually also. So, so, yeah. Do you want to hit me with a question. Yeah. So again, it's a it's a big topic right. With toxins.

There's so many toxins we can't cover them all or even get close to even beginning. But I, I would love to know or discuss maybe some of the top few that you think people should should really think about or can make, you know, get the most bang for our buck would be five or 10 or 3 or whatever you think is is reasonable to kind of cover.

Here and we, you know, wherever you want to start, I'm happy to go. But what what are the some of the biggies that people should really be thinking about from, an individual who's been through a lot in terms of training and yet now focusing on on toxins, which is very interesting for a rheumatologist.

Not the usual, I would say, which is great. Yeah. I mean, I sort of didn't ask for this. My, you know, if you read the foreword of nontoxic, it really talks about how I, my dog was sick.

I was a young physician. I had two young kids, but my dog got sick with something very unusual, which is

autoimmune hepatitis and sort of diving into his illness.

I learned about how humans are affected. Humans are affected by air quality, water quality.

Top environmental exposures in the home

You know, personal care products. So, so really, all that came from a place of great heartbreak, but has really been sort of the source of inspiration for what I keep trying to do, which is share with the world what we now know scientifically, evidence based information, you know, to really make smart decisions.

So, you know, when I talk about, you know, environmental exposures, which again, is a very big topic, I don't want anyone overwhelmed. I really like to think about, well, what do we do when we walk into our home space, into our workspace, into a nursery school, into an elementary school?

When you walk through your spaces of life, what hits your body? What affects your body? Things you can control are air quality in your own home. Okay.

And that really, in my opinion, in terms of chemicals, really means removing or not buying the stuff that we know air rates off chemicals. Chemicals we're not, you know, that we're not aware of chemicals that are in fragrances, for instance, that are not vetted for safety or toxicity or harm.

And so one of the key things to do when you walk into a space, you have to breathe is how do you remove the chemicals that, are really sort of like low hanging fruit, getting rid of, like, you know, toxic cleaners, and looking them up on, on.org, which is a wonderful organization.

And, and I share a lot of these resources in the work I do because I want people to have an ongoing resource that's, that keeps updating and does this very well.

So I think about, you know, candles, incense, air fresheners like Febreeze and Lysol, I can give you good stories, but it would take too long about my kids.

You know, nursery school, so that, you know, getting Lysol out of their school, which is really kind of an interesting, change over, but they did it quite readily.

And the idea was that these chemicals are circulating in a tight, closed space like our homes, but that they don't even open windows, they don't air right off.

They have, you know, teachers that are doing the concentrated cleaning solutions. And they were really unclear on how to concentrate or concentrate, I should say, and really dilute out those solutions.

So, you know, if you're mixing those chemicals at home or if it's part of your job or your workspace, you know, you have an opportunity to intervene is kind of the take home message.

But removing the chemicals that affect our air really starts with really not buying a lot of these products to begin with. When you're able to open windows where you have cleaner air, you know, in some places not, but in cleaner air outside than in, you want to let air circulate within the home.

You want to add plants to your home, you want to dust regularly, which is a pain for people who have to clean up after my two teenagers, for instance, or my pets.

But the idea is that dust actually hold on to a lot of chemicals. It's been, well tested. Mostly phthalates, a lot of flame retardant chemicals, but really not great chemicals for the human body.

Certainly not for young children who might touch toys with their mouths in this hand mouth behavior. They sort of get a, you know, a load of it when they when they're on the floor, pets also, they look their paws.

Certainly cats. So you're really removing the risks from your whole home and your family and your pets when you kind of get some dust out of there, you take out the products.

So that's a really good start. Another thing people would imagine is food quality, you know, trying to reduce chemicals that are in our food system, ultra processed foods, you know, trying to avoid food packaging chemicals, meaning like switching over to glass and stainless steel.

They're not costly anymore. Certainly not heating or microwaving any type of plastic with our food and our drinks, because that's going to leach into those products, those, those foods and drinks.

So really removing what gets ingested by choosing at the store what we buy. For instance, you know, if you can choose USDA organic produce, for instance, you can actually find this in almost every big box supermarket across the country because they're now making their own supply of USDA organic frozen foods, which are actually incredibly nutrient, nutrient dense, because the way they're made is they're picked and flash frozen, like immediately after they're packed.

They're picked, they're packed up and they're frozen, which means they actually hold on to a, an enormous amount of nutrient value. Fresh stuff, you know, as we know it in our minds, we think fresh, fresh travels fresh.

You know, that's pick that's not frozen. May travel for days or even weeks until it gets to the supermarket. And even if it's USDA organic, which means certainly far fewer chemicals used in production, non-GMO, non, you know, toxic fertilizers and that kind of thing.

It doesn't mean that the nutritional level is where it should be for what we need in our children and in our adult bodies, as well. So like, for instance, I just had at the office the other day, you know, blueberries, which I'm eating some blueberries and berries, but I pick USDA organic whenever I can find it.

And if they're fresh, which was technically what I found, it came from Peru. It didn't come that morning. It might have come maybe a week before, two weeks ago or maybe it was held in a low temperature freezer somewhere in Newark or someplace in new Jersey, because I'm in New Jersey.

But it certainly wasn't fresh. So unless you have a farmer's market, which are very plentiful, and you can talk with the farmer about their process, or you can find organic, farmers markets, or sellers, I think that would be the way to go because it's effect, you know, pick that morning.

But really, ultimately I'm pushing towards people having organic frozen's because there's a vast majority, I mean, a vast variety of foods you can get.

So I talk about food, I talk about air. I also really emphasize drinking water quality. You know, back when I had, my, my boys, 15 and six, 17 years ago, you know, we had, you know, at that point, I had Playtex drop in plastic containers.

We didn't really use glass. I didn't even know any of this information at that time, to be honest with you. It's a learning. It's a journey for me as well.

Food, packaging, and water quality

But I also, at the time had moved to Central New Jersey, and we live on sort of a farm environment, and it was very instinctually thought there could be problems with the water, even though I was still eating Oreos and Cheez Whiz and eating junk food, there was an instinct that we might have some type of contamination from the soil from around where we lived, so I started using bottled water.

Then I sort of moved into a pitcher filter, and then really moved. Eventually, once I knew more, I did better. I got a reverse osmosis machine that was actually in the kitchen, not a whole house, expensive filtration system, which I actually don't promote.

I'd rather use that money for other things, but, certainly under the kitchen sink, reverse osmosis, is really very aggressive in cleaning. Drinking water has to be vetted as well in terms of the company. But, you know, any filtration of water along the spectrum of faucet, fridge, you know, pitcher is fine, is great if you want to keep going and be more aggressive, you're going to be spending more money to get into that.

But I'll tell you, reverse osmosis filters, the one we have is $275. And they used to be 1500. And so I've watched the market change, and now I'm readily able to share that with people.

So the idea is that water, which makes up 85% of the human body, even, you know, perhaps more for children, is so critical to not only our physiology, and our sort of homeostasis and how everything functions properly, but it's a very key part of detoxifying and getting chemicals out of our bodies that we have no control over or, you know, we went and had a birthday party and a cake with lots of colored icing.

It's all life, but water can help wash a lot of that out of your system if you do it right. So you really want to get that right. Because why put in toxins if you don't have to?

So I think of food water, air. And then if you have teenagers I really emphasize feminine care products. Given that the root vaginally is incredibly absorbent.

We have medications like estradiol when we're my age that people use to get into your system. We know how absorbent the vaginal canal is, and people should really think about the use of tampons from, you know, teenage years all the way through and how many chemicals really do get absorbed daily.

During, you know, during women's periods and beyond. So thinking of all the roots of entry into the body and surveying the environment that you walk through in life every day, work or home, really can inform you as to sort of what exposures are hitting you and what you can remove.

Yeah. And I mean, just fantastic list. I mean, there's it's so nice to always hear when other people kind of echo the same things that you say. Then we're all we're all fighting the same fight, which is good.

And, and I like I love to hear it. And I guess what I wanted to talk about next is when you are talking about these things, when you're when you're mentioning these, these changes, now that you are more aware of what these things can do, what are you what are you finding in terms of how that's affecting people when they make these changes?

Because to me, the reason why I, I kind of take up this fight and, and talk about this. So often is because I really think that the small changes are what makes a big difference.

Certainly, you know, you can do everything and be the healthiest and have the zero toxin and still get sick, and you can do nothing and be super healthy.

But for the most part, the more that we're conscious of these things, I feel like, you know, we're having more and more chronic disease. We're having more and more illness.

And that's because of this buildup of the toxins that we're being exposed to, along with the crappy food. And if we make these small changes, like you mentioned, then our body is Brazilian and hopefully that's a good enough to keep us healthy.

So is that what you're seeing, kind of why you've taken up this mission? I'm just curious if it echoes the same thing that I'm saying. Yeah, it's taken about 15 years to get to where I am, where I have a much bigger and broader perspective of how to teach this material, which I am doing now to other doctors and colleges and high school students.

I think you have to understand the big lay out so that you can understand how to, feed people information in a very reasonable way. And what I've come to discover is that you have to say, listen, you know, whether we develop

some type of illness, any illness, is really this dance between our lifestyle, you know, our exposures and our genetics, all three play a big role into what is actually expressed from our genes.

That's called our exposome. So the idea is that we have control over only so much, right? We can't really control our genes, just like we can't control our in-laws.

Just kidding. But I mean, the idea that you want to be able to have what you can control, which feels so empowering because here's the punch line. I've measured patients blood and urine.

I measure my blood in urine occasionally, and in the past. I don't do it often, but I want people to, if they need it, to know what is in their body. Most people, 99% of people, do not need to have the tests to know that.

You could just assume, and I'll tell you this, we're pretty contaminated, especially if you haven't made a lot of these changes. But I've also tested people after changes.

And so that really informs me, as to what our behaviors are and how valuable they are to reducing our exposure. And then also perhaps playing into what we reducing our risk, which we know that many of these chemicals do have risk for illness.

So if you put all of that together and you make changes in a very reasonable way, starting with habits, I'll give you an example. Something you do every day is a great place to start when it comes to making changes.

You don't have to do everything overnight and be stressed about it. Pick one thing a week, one thing a month. So when I think about my habits, I drink tea.

I don't drink coffee. But I choose USDA organic tea. I try loose leaf tea because when you heat up any product, especially a manufactured product, even organic TV and tea bags, you're going to release not only the immediate chemicals, but chemicals, the memory chemicals of the manufacturing of those tea leaves and so if you can avoid a tea bag that's really usually made of nylon and some type of synthetic plastic, you're also removing the risk of exposure for microplastics.

So instead of wrap your head and being fearful, you just go to loose leaf tea. That's USDA organic. And now you have a you've cut down a huge, kind of a funnel of those chemicals.

Then you pick a mug instead of styrofoam. I used to do Dunkin Donuts styrofoam cups almost every day for like a good eight years before my kids. And, you know, you get into these habits because you don't believe there's risk.

But there is risks from styrofoam especially heated up. And so once you switch to a material like glass or stainless steel with no straw, you know, that's plastic.

I urge people to watch the little pieces of plastic that get heated and use regularly that they don't notice. But the idea is, once you change some habit that you do every day, you're removing a huge load, a huge, huge part of the body burden, so to speak.

Chemical influx. So, you know, surveying, looking at habits, tweaking one thing at a time. You know, this is kind of the messaging. It doesn't always or will prevent, you know, illness, but at least you're controlling something that we know scientifically has an association with those illnesses.

And we have. Yeah. And I always like to finish by talking about actionable steps. I already did it. I didn't need to ask you. I think you're already on it.

You obviously done a bunch of these before. And, Yeah, I just want to echo what you said because I forget who I think it was at Stanford. I forget exactly where the study was.

I'm sure you're aware, but there was a urine study that was done maybe a couple decades ago where they were

looking at all the toxins, and then they took the the chemicals before and after. It was like a week.

Reducing daily chemical burden through habits

And the top most of the chemicals went down like 90% or 99% or more. And it's like it's amazing how quickly the body can detoxify if we allow it to. And and just like you mentioned, you know, with the Dunkin Donuts, the styrofoam, it's not drinking from at once, that's really the big deal for most people.

If you do it for eight years, well, then a little bit of the whatever chemicals that are in there might build up. And you do it every single day over a long period of time.

Well, that's where you can usually run into an issue. It's not the one time, but we're doing things and so many things. We're exposed to so many chemicals, and we're doing it for so long that it just builds up in our body.

And if you can find a couple of those small things like you mentioned, then that can go a long way. You reduce one thing here, one thing here, one thing here, and that's maybe it's enough for you.

I'll give you another couple examples that I personally like. Examples I like real world, you know, trade, you know, change outs. Because again, I have kids, I'm working.

You know, I color my hair, so there's no perfection here. This is not about perfection. This is about, say, 80, 20. You know, some some weeks I'm 9010, but I'm never perfect.

So, you know, what I would like to share is that, so, you know, there are specific chemicals that your audience probably has heard of. Not all, but certainly there are groups that we hear about on TikTok and Instagram and all that stuff that really get you riled up.

But certain chemicals have what's called a half life, which means they break down, you know, all chemicals have a half life, which is how much is broken down by 50% over what period of time, and then another 50% after that, another 50.

So, you know, so the half life of some of these chemicals is much shorter, which means you can get rid of amount of your body much faster than, say, the forever chemicals or, or alcohols that are in a lot of nonstick pans, Scotchgard, stain guard chemicals, you know, things that are really designed to live forever because they actually have what's called a fluorine, molecule.

So don't get too technical, but the idea is that chemicals are designed for purpose. They're designed to be resilient. Plastics are designed to be tough and manage a lot of, wear and tear.

But that's not always good to be in our body. And our body can't always break them down. So, you know, when you think of BPA or bisphenol A, for instance, my partner for two books was, is Fred from Saul, doctor of was instrumental in discovering bisphenol A, and BPA is essentially a plastic, material, and it is found in all canned foods.

Very, very few are not made with BPA. They do exist, but they're very rare. So black plastic linings of cans were designed to really prevent any food contact with the metal container.

So there was a design purpose. The problem is, is it? It turns out that that plastic coating now makes its way into the food that are in cans. And, you know, instead of changing the whole industry, of course, the food industry won't change that unless we force them to, because it's a big cost and formulation problem.

What we can do as consumers is be conscious that BPA is not only in these areas that we use quite a bit. Right? I was a big cat eater until now. I'm almost always frozen, hardly any cans.

And guess what? There's plenty of options out there. Even organic foods are in cans, believe it or not. But it doesn't

take away from the fact that there's an exposure that you're pretty much getting all the time.

So it's this pseudo persistence we call it. But BPA gets out of our system in a normal, healthy human being within about a 6 to 8 hour period. And we measure it in urine.

So one of the the ways that we've had great studies, especially there was a wonderful one from Harvard. It was a crossover study with soup. And they use Progresso soup.

And they had, you know, 75 participants that had five days worth of, you know, homemade soup, no other changes. Homemade soup. It was progressive. I'm sorry. It was homemade.

And then they had three day washout. And the same 75 participants then had Progresso soup for five days, and they measured the BPA levels just that in their urine.

And they had an 1,100% reduction in BPA in their urine levels just from going from, Progresso canned soup once a day to homemade soup with no packaging and chemicals.

And so what it illustrates really, is that there are certain chemicals that are very pervasive that you can actually reduce dramatically in your urine levels or blood levels, depending on what you're testing, because the half life is shorter than, say, the per floor apples group, which is something much harder and lives in your body for 4 to 5 years.

So you want to work on maybe some choices regarding cans, but you can also get rid of your nonstick cooking pan and try to cut back on those chemicals that are longer lasting.

So we have lots of choices. And again, if it's overwhelming to people listening, you can do this at your own pace. You can do it in your own time frame, with your own economics and your own personal choices, which I do believe and respect.

But what I did was I kind of created a guidebook so people could dive in whenever they're ready. And I think that's the key issue is when you're ready, figure out what means something to you and just tweak that and it becomes this very positive cycle of empowerment, really.

And that's how I've seen it. I love it, yeah. I don't I don't have much to add that really. I mean, it's really, really well said. And I'm really excited to chat with you and to see the the fight that you're putting up here and, and helping people to really make the small changes because it what you're saying is the reality of what's going to happen in the short term.

I mean, people are not going to just start eating broccoli and go farm and maybe move to the mountains and some people will. But, you know, for the most part, it's these little changes that make a huge difference.

And hearing something like, oh, you know, you they had soup for a couple of days and look at the difference. It's like that. That's very actionable. It kind of speaks volumes to like how how much it matters.

And it's like, oh, I'm just drinking this coffee out of styrofoam every day. Doesn't matter. Well, it doesn't matter. Look at like just having soup for five days in a row, if that's what you're eating.

Imagine if you're sick eating whatever soup for a few days in a row, and it's like, well, why am I not getting better? You maybe you're getting a bunch of chemicals that your body has to deal with that they're not you're not used to.

So I think this is very important stuff. And I really appreciate that. So before we go, maybe you can tell people a little bit more about where to find you, the name of your book again.

Anything else you want to mention. Yeah. And, you know, listen, when it comes to health conditions, there's, you know, I'm a rheumatologist. I see patients with immune system disorders, but also autoimmune disorders.

I've been doing this 20 years. So I've watched the landscape and the epidemic of immune system disorders is real. Not just what I see in my own practice over 20 years.

And, you know, part of the fight of this, the story which, as a clinician, you're a clinician, I'm a clinician, is that we're really on the frontlines of this fight.

We're seeing people that aren't feeling well or having fatigue or their thyroid conditions that we never used to have because, oh, I don't know. There's a nutritional component to protecting your body as well as just removing chemicals.

And I get into that in the book. So that's not really the venue right now. But what I want people to understand is that as as physicians, we're really trying to solve the problems at sort of the last the end stages of what the exposure is, what I'm trying to do is get people to think, how do you prevent these diseases in the first place?

How do you prevent feeling lousy? How do you get the right nutrition that offsets the environmental exposures?

BPA, forever chemicals, and measurable impact

Because there's a whole wonderful world of science that shows that certain nutrients actually offset genetic changes and, and exposome issues from exposure.

So even if you can't control manufacturing and state laws and regulation, you can fix with medicine through food, some of the problems that you can't control. So, yeah, I encourage people to find me if you certainly.

I mean, I see still see patients, you know, in Princeton, new Jersey. I also do telemedicine. It's under Ali Cohen, MD, Ali Cohen, MD, dot com. But if people want to just start to feel out their way through this discussion and this this kind of information, please follow the smart human, is my platform on TikTok.

The smart human Instagram, the smart human. Facebook's wonderful. I think it's up to almost 52,000 just organically. And really I post Monday, Wednesday, Friday.

So you know, or the smart human.com certainly this is the book that took it's 400 and some pages. It took about the accumulative seven years of studying, understanding the topic before I could spit it out in a way that people would actually understand it.

So if you're interested in deep diving into, you know, a chapter that I have on water, a chapter we have on personal care products, that's what I do with my high school students.

I, I teach them how to look up their cosmetics. I have teenagers, so they're very good at it. Now, there's a there's an answer for this. And I just want people not to be overwhelmed, but just kind of tiptoe their way in and just know good resources.

Not not advertisements for products, not advertisements for all the junk that's on social media. Really go where the the vetted sciences and the people like myself and others that I work with that really share good information that's, legitimate.

Well, thank you for for everything that you do. And then keep going. I think in a, as a, as a team of physicians, hopefully, you know, we can continue to kind of push people into this space and be balanced in terms of, you know, following medicine and science, but still understanding that there can be some root causes to some of the stuff that we do have some some control over and I hope that, you know, really the next generation of physicians that comes up continues to think this way.

And then hopefully together we can push industry to a little bit better place. So that way we can all, you know, be healthier. But at least as of right now, the important thing is that parents need to be mindful of this and to take, take this to heart and, you know, maybe grab your book.

I definitely recommend following you. And and that way you can start making some of these small changes for yourself. So again, thank you for everything that you do.

And thanks everyone. My pleasure. And thanks, Joe. Thanks for having me. And it does take a village. So thanks for your support as well for this work.

Where to find Aly Cohen and final takeaways

This is why I'm inviting you to join me at the ADHD, autism and Chronic Disease Parenting Summit. ADHD, autism and chronic disease parenting summit. Thank you for claiming your seven day free access to the ADHD, Autism and Chronic Disease Parenting Summit.

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