

All that's scented is not safe

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Beware of this variety of candles as they might be toxic for your health. Experts shed light on the matter.

They look pretty, smell good and are a popular gifting choice. Everyone's received scented candles as gifts at least once! But before you decide to light up your home with these scented candles for that romantic night or a relaxing bath or just to lift up your mood, you might want to rethink your decision. There are numerous articles online that highlight their toxic properties and the health risks associated with them. We asked experts if there's any truth to these innocent looking, wonderful smelling scented candles...

Health risk claims

There are many discussed online but here's a quick brief on them:

Candles made from beeswax and soy, which are the more expensive variety, are safer and rarely cause problems. However, majority of those sold in the market, of the cheap variety are made from paraffin wax, which is a by-product of the petroleum industry. These are said to release an alarming range of Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs), which can cause health problems.

Though scented candles seem safe, they are a big source of indoor air pollution and they give off chemicals that are considered just as dangerous as second-hand smoke.

Another cause for concern is that many scented candles also have wicks that contain metal like lead. Exposure to high amounts of lead has been linked to behavioural problems, hormone disruption, learning disabilities, to name a few.

For someone who lights a scented candle daily for years or just uses them frequently, inhaling of these pollutants in the air could contribute to the development of health risks like common allergies, asthma, trigger asthma or even cancer.

Often these candles are lit in poorly ventilated rooms, such as bathrooms or at night when windows are mostly closed, the resulting indoor pollution can raise the risk of eczema and skin problems too.

The paraffin wax is not the only culprit. While the expensive variety of candles are scented with natural perfumes and/or essential oils, the cheap mass market products contain synthetic fragrances and in some cases, dyes, which emit harmful particles when they are heated.

Expert speak

Dr Prashant Chhajed, consultant, chest physician and pulmonology, Fortis Hospital says, "Anecdotally, there seems to be several health risks associated with these scented candles. However, there are no conclusive studies and evidence to show this. We come across several patients who are allergic to dust, strong smells, perfumes, complain about developing allergic

rhinitis and increase in symptoms like cough, sneezing, runny nose, nasal blockages, chest tightness, breathlessness, etc. in the presence of scented candles. Not just scented candles but also to car perfume. It's not unusual, it's quite common."

Are beeswax and soy-based candles a safe alternative? "They might be safe, however, there's no studies or strong evidence on them. Having said that, definitely avoid the cheap variety of scented candles made with synthetic perfumes," he says.

Dr Vikrant Shah, Consulting Physician, Zen Multispeciality Hospital, says this is a very controversial issue that when a candle is lit, the fumes as well as the liberation of various chemical substances leads to lung and skin problems. "The fumes released can be harmful for those with hyper allergic syndromes as these individuals find it difficult to inhale the smell of deodorant, perfume or even talcum powder. They develop frequent cold or running nose because of these allergies," he opines.

Dr Shah adds, "Pollutants in the air will definitely lead to health risks but not necessarily cancer. I have not heard of such instances. Scented candles only masks the odour but the fume and chemicals that are released in the air leads to common skin allergies and asthma. As some individuals are very sensitive to smell, these candles can trigger allergies."

Mosquito coils

Dr Chhajed points to the often overlooked mosquito coils, "Mosquito coils are harmful to the respiratory system as they generate a lot of smoke, a lot of compounds that are harmful to the lungs, also they are linked to symptoms of bronchitis," he warns.

Caution for children

Children are prone to allergies and can easily develop bronchitis or related health risks as their immune system is low. They are vulnerable to recurrent upper respiratory tract infections. For children, incense sticks can also lead to allergy. It is even essential to change their pillow or cushion covers and bed sheets on a daily basis, if they are diagnosed with allergic rhinitis or bronchitis. Scented candles can trigger more health issues in this population, warns Dr Shah. Dr Chhajed has a special word of caution especially for children saying, "Children who have allergies and asthma should stay away from all of these because even if they develop symptoms, they might not be picked until the problem has escalated."