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Incense could be harmful to health, EPA officials warn

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STAFF REPORTER

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Incense used in temples, home altars and on ceremonial occasions have been found to release benzene, among a host of other organic compounds, into the air when burnt, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials said yesterday.

The most highly polluting incense of the five types the agency tested raised the concentration of benzene in the testing room to 7.6 parts per million from a background concentration that was too low to be detected, the agency said.

Yang Chen-chang (楊振昌), a toxicologist at Taipei Veterans General Hospital, said benzene was a known carcinogen.

"Benzene's status as a grade one carcinogen is not in doubt," he said, adding that long-term exposure could result in an increased likelihood of leukemia and aplastic anemia.

The study, which sampled different varieties of incense commonly burnt as spiritual offerings, was conducted by the EPA's Environmental Analysis Laboratory at the behest of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Chen Chao-rung (陳朝容).

"Good incense should be made from sandalwood and agarwood," Chen said. "Inferior incense can contain any number of chemical compounds. There is currently no way for consumers to determine the quality of their incense."

Chen called upon the Bureau of Standards, Metrology and Inspection under the Ministry of Economic Affairs to step up testing of incense for ingredients that do not meet national standards.

In addition to calling on the EPA to amend the draft statute governing indoor air quality management to include temples among the indoor spaces that are governed by the statute and present it to the Legislative Yuan as quickly as possible, Chen urged manufacturers to start labeling incense with information about ingredients and country of origin.

The use of incense and burnt paper money is likely to be high over the next few weeks, said Yeh Fang-lu (葉芳露), a senior engineer with the EPA's Air Quality Protection and Noise Bureau, as it is customary to hold ceremonies offering food and incense to the spirit realm in the seventh lunar month, better known as "Ghost Month" (鬼月), when it is believed the gates to the underworld are opened. Ghost month began on Monday.

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