

## Letter

## Phthalate esters on hands of office workers: Estimating influence of touching surfaces

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15 **ABSTRACT**

16 Phthalate esters are known to be transferred to hands by contact with surfaces,  
17 however, little is known about associations between masses on hand wipes and  
18 frequency or duration of touching surfaces, especially surfaces in office environments.  
19 Relationships between PAEs on hands and multiple surfaces in offices were  
20 investigated. Wipes of hands, computers, and mobile phones as well as dust on  
21 furniture were collected from 55 offices in China. Positive associations were found  
22 between masses of di-2-ethylhexyl phthalate (DEHP), dibutyl phthalate (DnBP),  
23 benzyl butyl phthalate (BBP) and di-*n*-octyl phthalate (DnOP) on wipes of hands and  
24 wipes of keyboards of computers. When workers used keyboards with polymer  
25 covers (dust covers), masses of these lipophilic PAEs on hands were significantly  
26 correlated with masses on keyboards rather than dust on furniture. For workers who  
27 used keyboards without polymer covers, masses on hands were related to masses in  
28 dust on furniture. Use of polymer covers containing PAEs and less washing of hands  
29 could increase the mass of exposure via hand to body of office workers, which could  
30 further result in as much as 10-fold greater hazard. Thus, more hand washing and  
31 less use of polymer products containing PAEs were recommended for office workers  
32 to reduce exposures.

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## INTRODUCTION

Phthalate esters (PAEs) are used as plasticizers to enhance flexibility in a variety of household and building materials, including cables, wires, silicone films, screen guards, vinyl flooring and polyvinylchloride (PVC) tubing <sup>1</sup>. Phthalate esters including di-2-ethylhexyl phthalate (DEHP), dibutyl phthalate (DnBP), dimethyl phthalate (DMP), diethyl phthalate (DEP), benzyl butyl phthalate (BBP) and di-*n*-octyl phthalate (DnOP) (Table S1)<sup>2,3</sup> are not chemically bound within products and can be slowly emitted into indoor environments. In a study that analyzed 89 organic chemicals in 120 homes, phthalate esters were one of the most abundant indoor pollutants <sup>4</sup>.

Recently, indoor exposure of humans to PAEs on skin and especially on hands has been shown to be non-negligible <sup>5, 6</sup>. Phthalate esters that are transferred to hands by contact with surfaces and direct air-to-skin transport, can represent a significant proportion of total accumulation <sup>6</sup>. Besides direct absorption through skin, PAEs on hands can result in inadvertent ingestion, by biting of nails, sucking of digits or eating finger foods <sup>7, 8</sup>.

Since previous studies of PAEs have focused on residential exposures, little is known about exposure in offices, although studies have shown greater concentrations of PAEs in dust from offices than those from apartments <sup>9</sup>. Phthalate esters which tended to be strongly adsorbed to indoor surfaces, such as protectors of computer screens, keyboards, furniture, floor and desks, are commonly touched by hands of office workers <sup>10</sup>. Whether and how touching surfaces in offices can increase penetration through hands and further increase the health risk was unknown.

It was hypothesized that PAEs in office furniture might result in exposure of office workers through touching surfaces. The main objectives of the present study were to examine relationships between PAEs on hands of people and on probable touched surfaces in offices by determining amounts of PAEs on surfaces in offices, including computers, mobile phones and dust on furniture. Another objective was to better understand the role of behaviors of workers, including use of polymer covers and habits of hand washing to these relationships and also to the hazards of exposure

64 via hand to body.

## 65 MATERIALS AND METHODS

66 **Collection of samples.** Samples were collected from April to June 2014.  
67 Participants for this study consisted of 55 adults who worked at least 20 h a week in  
68 an office and were healthy, nonsmokers in the cities of Huaian (n=12), Zhenjiang  
69 (n=31) and Nanjing (n=12) in East China. Offices were located in ten different  
70 buildings, and only one person per office participated in the study. Questionnaires  
71 were also completed at the time samples were collected (see study design in SI).  
72 Within-individual variability was estimated by collecting samples in triplicate from  
73 four participants. Samples of dust were collected from each participant's office,  
74 including dust on desks, chairs, bookcases and personal accessible furniture by use of  
75 a standardized protocol that used a mini vacuum cleaner.

76 To avoid contamination of hands from sources other than the offices, participants  
77 were asked to wash their hands before entering the office. Samples of PAEs on  
78 hands were collected by use of wipes applied at close of business. A 7.6×7.6 cm  
79 sterile gauze pad pre-cleaned with dichloromethane and acetone was immersed in 3.0  
80 mL of isopropyl alcohol (Tedia Co. Ltd, Fairfield, OH, USA) and then used to wipe  
81 the palm and back of the hand from wrist to fingertips, including sides. Wipes of  
82 computer keyboards and mobile phones were collected from participants in their  
83 office after collection of wipe samples of hands and at least 1 day after the last time  
84 the computer, phone or furniture was cleaned.

85 To confirm sources of PAEs, wipes of keyboards were further collected from  
86 twelve computers in six offices. In each office, there were two keyboards, one with a  
87 polymer cover and one without a polymer cover. Polymer keyboard covers are  
88 removable polymer plastic sheets that are placed on keyboards and left in place while  
89 typing. Keyboards and polymer covers were cleaned with isopropyl alcohol in the  
90 morning and they were kept in offices without disruption for 5 days. More  
91 information for collection of samples is given in supporting information (SI).

92 **Preparation of samples and quantification of PAEs.** PAEs in samples were  
93 extracted by use of accelerated solvent extraction (ASE). PAEs were quantified by

use of a Thermo TSQ Quantum Discovery triple-quadrupole mass spectrometer (San Jose, CA, USA) in multiple-reaction monitoring (MRM) mode. More detailed information for instrumental analysis, procedural blanks and other QA/QC procedures is listed in SI, Table S1 and Table S2.

**Assessment of cumulative hazard.** The concept of relative cumulative hazard quotient (HQ), developed previously, was employed to incorporate cumulative exposure into the assessment<sup>11</sup>. The daily intake (DI) of PAEs through exposure on hands was divided by tolerable daily intake values for each PAE (TDI<sub>i</sub> value) and the HQ for individual PAEs (HQ-PAE<sub>i</sub>) were summed to obtain total hazard quotients (HQs) including BBP, DBP, DEP and DEHP.

$$HQs = \sum_{i=1}^n HQ-PAE_i = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{DI_i (\mu g/kg \text{ bw/day})}{TDI_i (\mu g/kg \text{ bw/day})} \quad (1)$$

Where: DI<sub>i</sub> is daily intake (exposure through hand) of individual PAEs, and n is the number of PAEs considered. DI<sub>i</sub> is the sum of exposure through hand-to-mouth contact (μg/kg bw/day) and absorption through the dermis of the hand (μg/kg bw/day) (More detail is shown in SI and Table S3).

**Data analysis.** We used Spearman correlations (SPSS statistics software package, V. 17.0) to determine associations between continuous variables while minimizing the influence of outliers. To minimize effects of skewed data and outliers, we created categorical variables from surfaces and hand wipe data: Two-level variables (lesser, and greater) were created using the median as a cut-point (detail is in SI).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Phthalate esters on wipes of hands.** Phthalate esters were detected in all wipes of surfaces of hands (Table S4). As expected, DEHP was the predominant compound, followed by DnBP and DnOP. This pattern for skin wipes is consistent with the pattern observed in serum of people from China for DEHP, DnBP and DnOP, although no study has previously reported masses of DnOP on wipes of hands<sup>12, 13</sup>. Few studies have examined phthalates in wipes of hands (Table S5). Generally, DEHP and DnBP are among the most widely detectable PAEs on wipes of hands in

123 Korea, Beijing in China and also East China detected in the present study<sup>14, 15</sup>. DEP  
124 was not detected on wipes of hands of Koreans, while a frequency of detection of less  
125 than 20% was observed in the study of people in Beijing, which is approximately the  
126 same as the frequency of 52% observed in the present study. This might be due to  
127 its greater vapor pressure, which results in a greater partition coefficient<sup>16</sup>.

128 **Phthalate esters from surfaces in offices.** PAEs were detectable on surfaces  
129 of furniture, keyboards and phones, which based on the results of questionnaires, were  
130 the most touched surfaces (Table S4). DnBP, BBP, DEHP and DnOP had a greater  
131 detection frequency for all types of surface samples. DEHP was the most  
132 predominant compound, with geometric means (GM) of 148 µg/g, 83.6 µg and 10.2 µg  
133 for dust, keyboards and phones, respectively. For all PAEs, masses on keyboards  
134 were 3- to 8-fold greater than those on phones, which might be due to the large area of  
135 keyboards and limited variation indicated similar sources for PAEs on keyboard and  
136 phone. Distributions of masses and normalized concentrations of PAEs measured on  
137 wipe samples had similar variability (Figure S1), and masses not concentrations on  
138 wipes of hands, surfaces of computer keyboards and phones were used in the  
139 following studies. Concentrations and masses of PAEs in repeated samplings of dust  
140 and wipes over a three month period are mostly consistent (See repeated  
141 measurements in SI and Figure S2).

142 **Associations of PAEs on hand wipes with indoor surfaces.** Total masses of  
143 PAEs on wipes of hands were positively correlated with masses on wipes of surfaces  
144 of computer keyboards, with a Spearman correlation coefficient (R) of 0.59 ( $p < 0.001$ ,  
145 Figure S3). Among the six PAEs, masses of DEHP and DnBP on wipes of keywords  
146 and hands were most correlated with Spearman correlation coefficient (R) of 0.58 ( $p$   
147  $< 0.001$ ) and 0.47 ( $p < 0.001$ ), respectively (See Figure S4 and S5). Results of linear  
148 regression showed that DEHP and DnBP on surfaces of computer keyboards were a  
149 significant predictor of PAEs on hands ( $p < 0.001$ , Table S6). Masses of DEP and  
150 DMP on wipes of computer keyboards were not associated with masses on hands.  
151 This indicated that behavior of congeners with shorter alkyl side chains, such as DEP  
152 and DMP, in the indoor environment might differ from that of longer chain

153 congeners<sup>17</sup>. Results of previous studies have indicated that shorter-chain PAEs are  
154 more hydrophilic, thus they might be less likely to stick to surfaces of hands,  
155 especially for longer periods of time<sup>18</sup>.

156 Total masses of PAEs on wipes of hands were weakly correlated with  
157 concentrations in office dust and wipes of surfaces of phones. Similar results were  
158 obtained for other individual phthalates. Previous studies have also shown weak  
159 associations between masses of penta-BDE, BDE-183 or BDE-209 in office dust with  
160 masses on hands.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

161 **Predictors of masses of PAEs in wipes of hands.** Masses of total PAEs were  
162 further categorized according to the number of times hands were washed during work.  
163 Participants who washed their hands fewer than four times per day had on average  
164 about 10-fold greater masses of  $\Sigma$ phthalate esters on their hands compared with those  
165 with a greater frequency of washing. Similar situations were observed for masses of  
166 DnBP, BBP, DEHP and DnOP on less frequently washed hands which were 3-, 7-, 16-  
167 and 7-fold greater than hands which were washed more frequently (Table S6).

168 According to the questionnaire, participants who washed their hands less than  
169 four times per day were further divided into two categories according to whether they  
170 used a polymer keyboard covers or not (Table S6). Masses of the sum of PAEs on  
171 wipes of hands of those who used polymer covers (n=24) were approximately 14-fold  
172 greater than masses on hands of individuals who did not use polymer covers on  
173 keyboards (n=15), although concentrations in dust from offices for the two categories  
174 were similar. Similar trends were observed for DEHP and DnBP on wipes of hands,  
175 which were 4- and 18-fold greater, respectively. Masses of DEHP and DnBP on  
176 polymer keyboard covers were significantly correlated with masses on hands of those  
177 who used polymer covers ( $r=0.88$ ,  $p<0.001$  for DEHP and  $r=0.66$ ,  $p<0.001$  for DnBP),  
178 and the correlations were stronger than those for the person who did not use polymer  
179 covers on keyboards ( $R=0.57$ ,  $p<0.001$  for DEHP and  $R=0.38$ ,  $p<0.001$  for DnBP).  
180 For persons who used polymer covers, the greater masses of PAEs on their hands  
181 were likely caused by direct contact with polymer covers during working hours.

182 Participants in offices with lesser concentrations of  $\Sigma$ PAEs, DnBP, BBP, DEHP



183 and DnOP (with  $\Sigma$ PAEs less than median masses) in dust who used polymer covers  
184 (n=10) had significantly ( $p<0.01$ ) greater masses of PAEs on wipes of their hands  
185 compared with people who worked in offices with greater concentrations (with  $\Sigma$ PAEs  
186 greater than median masses) in dust, but did not use polymer covers (n=14, Figure 1).  
187 For those who did not use polymer covers, participants in offices with greater  
188 concentrations of PAEs in dust had significantly ( $p<0.01$ ) greater masses of PAEs on  
189 wipes of their hands. This result indicated that for workers who did not use polymer  
190 covers on their keyboards, redistributions of PAEs in office environments influenced  
191 masses on hands and concentrations in dust on furniture were correlated with masses  
192 on hands. Mass on hands of workers who used polymer covers on their keyboards  
193 were less related to concentrations in office dust, but more related to masses on  
194 polymer covers, which seems to be the source of the PAEs on hands.

195 **Influence to hazards of exposure via hand to body.** Estimated HQs of total  
196 exposure via hands during working was 0.03 (50<sup>th</sup> centile of masses) and 0.8 (95<sup>th</sup>  
197 centile of masses), which were less than 1.0, but by a small margin of safety ( $1.0 / 0.8$   
198  $=1.3$ ) (Table 1). The mean cumulative HQ for participants who washed their hands  
199 less than four times was twice the amount for those who washed more than four times  
200 per day. Among the participants who washed their hands less than four times per  
201 day, the HQs for people who used keyboard polymer cover was 0.18, and is as much  
202 as 10-fold greater than that for people who do not use polymer keyboard covers.

203 Among multiple surfaces in offices, exposure to PAEs through hands are likely  
204 affected by exposure to PAEs on surfaces of computer keyboards, especially when  
205 keyboard polymer covers are used. Washing of hands and not using of polymer  
206 keyboard covers could reduce the mass and related hazard of exposures of office  
207 workers to PAEs, via hands. Nowadays, polymer products including polymer  
208 keyboard covers and protective films for phone/pad screens that contain PAEs are  
209 widely used and act as the most common touchable surface according to our  
210 questionnaire survey with total contact being as much as 10 hours per day. These  
211 polymer products contain PAE as supplements or impurities. Significant migration  
212 of PAE from some polymer packaging of foods or oil have been investigated

213 previously. However, to our knowledge, little information is available from which to  
214 evaluate migration of PAE from polymer surfaces to hands. Since direct contact  
215 with these may be an underappreciated source of exposure of humans, more attention  
216 should be paid to the additive compositions of polymer products in general.

217

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219 **ASSOCIATED CONTENT**

220 Supporting Information

221 The Supporting Information is available free of charge on the ACS Publications  
222 website.

223 Supporting experimental section, results section with detailed description, Tables  
224 S1–S6, and Figures S1–S5.

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**Figure Legends**

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Figure 1. Geometric means (GM) of masses of phthalate esters on wipes of hands by

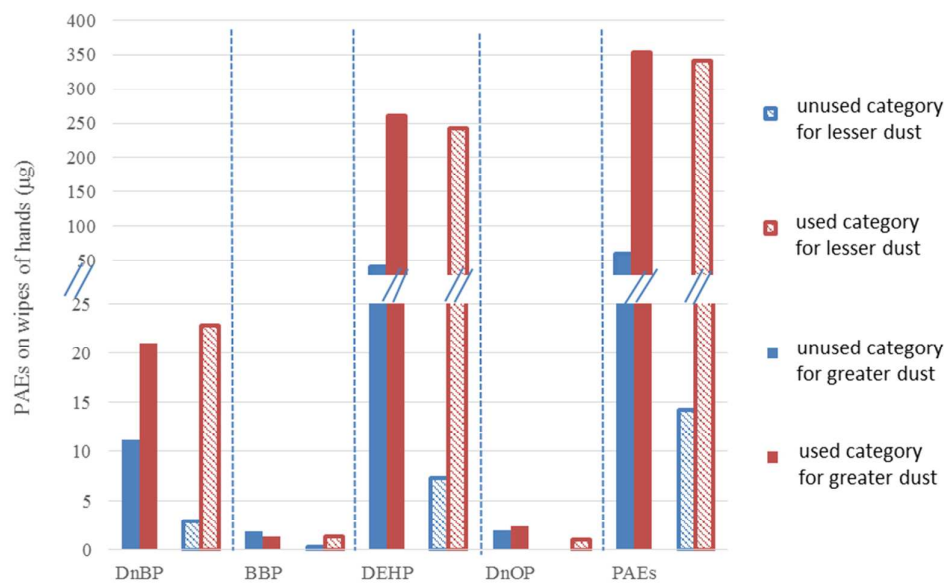
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amount of dust in office and polymer cover using categories ( $n = 39$ ). Greater masses

305

were found in lesser-dust/used category than greater-dust/unused category ( $p < 0.05$ ).

306 Figure 1.



307

308

Table

309    **Table 1. Hazard quotients (HQs) for lipophilic phthalate esters (PAEs) through hand to body exposures among categories.**

	Individual TDI <sub>i</sub> (µg/kg bm/day)	Total absorption through		More frequent		Less frequent		Not use keyboard dust		Use keyboard dust cover	
		Hand		hand-washers		hand-washers		cover			
		50 <sup>th</sup> centile	95 <sup>th</sup> centile	50 <sup>th</sup> centile	95 <sup>th</sup> centile	50 <sup>th</sup> centile	95 <sup>th</sup> centile	50 <sup>th</sup> centile	95 <sup>th</sup> centile	50 <sup>th</sup> centile	95 <sup>th</sup> centile
		HQ	HQ	HQ	HQ	HQ	HQ	HQ	HQ	HQ	HQ
DnBP	10	1.71×10 <sup>-2</sup>	5.84×10 <sup>-2</sup>	2.31×10 <sup>-2</sup>	2.31×10 <sup>-2</sup>	2.38×10 <sup>-2</sup>	7.59×10 <sup>-2</sup>	1.30×10 <sup>-2</sup>	3.00×10 <sup>-2</sup>	3.72×10 <sup>-2</sup>	9.01×10 <sup>-2</sup>
BBP	200	7.91×10 <sup>-5</sup>	6.46×10 <sup>-4</sup>	8.55×10 <sup>-5</sup>	8.55×10 <sup>-5</sup>	1.17×10 <sup>-4</sup>	1.25×10 <sup>-3</sup>	1.16×10 <sup>-4</sup>	2.72×10 <sup>-4</sup>	1.13×10 <sup>-4</sup>	1.14×10 <sup>-3</sup>
DEHP	50	9.09×10 <sup>-3</sup>	7.82×10 <sup>-1</sup>	1.10×10 <sup>-2</sup>	1.10×10 <sup>-2</sup>	2.99×10 <sup>-2</sup>	1.05	6.98×10 <sup>-3</sup>	2.54×10 <sup>-2</sup>	1.44×10 <sup>-1</sup>	1.06
DnOP	370	2.72×10 <sup>-5</sup>	5.80×10 <sup>-4</sup>	7.12×10 <sup>-5</sup>	7.12×10 <sup>-5</sup>	6.13×10 <sup>-5</sup>	5.64×10 <sup>-4</sup>	1.13×10 <sup>-5</sup>	1.67×10 <sup>-4</sup>	7.09×10 <sup>-5</sup>	6.57×10 <sup>-4</sup>
Sum		2.63×10 <sup>-2</sup>	8.42×10 <sup>-1</sup>	3.42×10 <sup>-2</sup>	3.42×10 <sup>-2</sup>	5.38×10 <sup>-2</sup>	1.13	2.01×10 <sup>-2</sup>	5.58×10 <sup>-2</sup>	1.82×10 <sup>-1</sup>	1.15

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