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# The Precautionary Principle

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## *A Common Sense Way to Protect Our Health & Environment*

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### **What is the precautionary principle?**

The 1998 Wingspread Statement on the Precautionary Principle summarizes the principle this way: “When an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.” ([www.sehn.org](http://www.sehn.org))

All statements of the Precautionary Principle contain a version of this formula:

*When the health of humans and the environment is at stake, it may not be necessary to wait for scientific certainty to take protective action.*

### **Is there some special meaning for “precaution”?**

Precaution is the common sense idea behind many adages: “Be careful.” “Better safe than sorry.” “Look before you leap.” “First do no harm.”

“Precautionary principle” is a translation of the German *Vorsorgeprinzip*. *Vorsorge* means, literally, “forecaring.” It carries the sense of foresight and preparation—not merely “caution.”

The principle applies to human health and the environment. The ethical assumption behind the precautionary principle is that humans are responsible to protect, preserve, and restore the global ecosystems on which all life, including our own, depends.

### **Why should we take action before science tells us what is harmful or what is causing harm?**

Sometimes if we wait for certainty, it is too late. When evidence gives us good reason to believe that an activity, technology, or substance may be harmful, we should act to prevent harm. If we always wait for scientific certainty, people may suffer and die and the natural world may suffer irreversible damage. For example, smoking was strongly suspected of causing lung cancer long before the link was demonstrated conclusively. By then, many smokers had died of lung cancer. However, many other people had already quit smoking because of the growing evidence that smoking was linked to lung cancer. These people were wisely exercising precaution despite some scientific uncertainty.

### **How do we implement the precautionary principle?**

The precautionary principle is most powerful when it serves as a guide to making wiser decisions in the face of uncertainty. *Any action that contributes to preventing harm to humans and the environment, learning more about the consequences of actions, and acting appropriately is precautionary.*

It is best linked to these implementation methods:

- Exploring **alternative ways** to do things, especially “clean” technologies that eliminate waste and toxic substances;
- Placing the **burden of proof** on proponents of an activity rather than on victims or potential victims of the activity;
- Setting and working toward **goals** that protect health and the environment; and
- Bringing **democracy and transparency** to decisions affecting health and the environment.

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**Fact Sheet by Science & Environmental Health Network ([www.sehn.org](http://www.sehn.org))**

**The BE SAFE Precautionary Platform is coordinated by the**

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