

On the lookout

Following last issue's story on *Our Everyday Toxic Life*, JO IMMIG tells how to watch for toxic chemicals in everyday products.



IN THE PREVIOUS ISSUE OF OG, an interview with authors of the book *Slow Death by Rubber Duck*, Rick Smith and Bruce Lourie, revealed how easily toxic chemicals in household products can get into our bodies, posing potentially serious health impacts.

The authors' experiments focussed on seven common, yet controversial, chemicals found in everyday products: phthalates (plasticisers); brominated flame retardants (BFRs); bisphenol-A (BPA); perfluorochemicals ('non-stick' chemicals); triclosan (antibacterial); mercury; and the herbicide 2,4-D.

We thought we'd follow up with measures for avoiding exposure to these and other chemicals.

Avoidance strategies

We get exposed to chemicals in three ways: we breathe them in; absorb them through the skin; and ingest them in food and beverages. An organic diet protects you from ingesting pesticide residues, but if you're cooking with 'non-stick' cookware and heating food in plastic containers in the microwave, you'll be ingesting other chemicals.

The key to reducing your body pollution is to avoid exposure to toxic chemicals whenever possible. This can be difficult, considering globalised trade means products may come into Australia containing unknown and unregulated chemical ingredients.

Also, different types of products are subject to different regulations.

Cleaning products, for instance – for reasons of 'commercial confidentiality' – are not required by law to list all the

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE	
PERSONAL CARE: Shampoos & conditioners; hair gels & sprays; deodorants; aftershave; perfume; toothpaste; mouthwash; soaps & body washes; sunscreens; cosmetics (including kids' make-up kits)	
SOME CHEMICALS OF CONCERN	SAFER OPTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Fragrance or parfum*; ✗ Phthalates; ✗ Formaldehyde; ✗ Antibacterials (eg, triclosan); ✗ Sodium lauryl/laureth sulphate (SLS); ✗ Nanotechnology (eg nano silver, zinc, titanium); ✗ Volatile solvents; ✗ Harsh detergents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Certified organic; ✓ 100% plant- and mineral-based products, unfragranced or fragranced with 100% pure essential oils**; ✓ Roll-on and hand pumped spray deodorants and sunscreens over aerosols
CLEANING PRODUCTS: Air fresheners; Laundry products; detergents; various cleaners; mould removers; disinfectants.	
SOME CHEMICALS OF CONCERN	SAFER OPTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Fragrance or parfum*; ✗ Phthalates; ✗ Formaldehyde; ✗ Antibacterials (eg, triclosan); ✗ Sodium lauryl/laureth sulphate (SLS); ✗ Nanotechnology (eg nano silver); ✗ Volatile solvents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Pure soap and water; ✓ Sunlight; ✓ Ventilation; ✓ Micro-fibre cloths; ✓ Certified organic products; ✓ 100% plant- and mineral-based products.
KITCHENWARE: Pots, pans and baking dishes; utensils; plastic storage containers	
SOME CHEMICALS OF CONCERN	SAFER OPTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Perfluorochemicals ('non-stick' chemicals); ✗ Bisphenol-A (BPA) (polycarbonate containers, epoxy linings in tin cans, baby bottles and utensils); ✗ Antibacterials (eg, triclosan) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cast iron; ✓ Stainless steel; ✓ Glass containers; ✓ Wood (eg, utensils, breadboards); ✓ Cloth bags for shopping
FURNISHINGS: Mattresses; lounge suites (including protective treatments); carpets; curtains	
SOME CHEMICALS OF CONCERN	SAFER OPTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Polybrominated flame retardants (PBDEs) (foam, mattresses); ✗ Perfluorochemicals (stain-protected carpets, upholstered furniture and fabrics); ✗ Formaldehyde (foam, glues); ✗ Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) (eg, flooring, shower curtains) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Natural fibres such as wool, hemp, organic cotton; ✓ Latex; PBDE-free foam and furnishings; ✓ Avoid stain-proofing
* There are over 500 potential chemicals that may be used under the description 'fragrance' or 'parfum'. Manufacturers are not required to list the ingredients that qualify as 'fragrance'. Many fragrances are phthalates.	
** Choose certified organic products or products certified by an independent assessment organisation such as Good Environmental Choice –Australia (GECA) www.geca.org.au	



chemical ingredients they contain on the labels. By calling the manufacturer and asking for a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS), you may find out what major groups of chemicals are in the product – but not everything.

Pesticide products only list the ‘active’ ingredients, which may only be a small percentage of the overall contents – but what about the other ingredients? It’s not possible to make an informed choice with so little information. Meanwhile, cosmetics with their long lists of unfamiliar chemical

ingredients, or foods with food additive and preservative numbers, make it hard to sort out the chemical puzzle.

Commonsense choices

Customer-focused labelling laws would be helpful, but that’s probably a long way off. Meanwhile, try to develop a healthy sense of inquisitiveness, especially about products claiming to be ‘natural’, and use your commonsense. If you don’t know what something is made of, and the manufacturer is not willing to disclose all the ingredients, question if you

should use it. To take the angst out of many decisions, consider switching from products containing complex compounds derived from petrochemicals to simpler products made from natural materials and plant-based chemistry. Also consider looking for products with simple lists of ingredients.

Better still, choose certified organic products, or ask yourself: “Do I really need this product?”. See the Quick Reference Guide on page 89 for examples of products containing harmful chemicals and healthier, safer alternatives. **OG**

MORE INFORMATION

- Australian Competition & Consumer Commission, Product Safety Australia: www.productsafety.gov.au
- Fresh Green Clean: www.freshgreenclean.com.au
- Skin Deep Cosmetics Database: www.cosmeticsdatabase.com

- Healthy toys: www.healthystuff.org
- The Chemical Maze, a best-selling book listing additives in food and chemicals in cosmetics. There is now also a website and even a phone application: www.chemicalmaze.com
- Ewetopia environmental education and products: www.ewetopia.com.au

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