

Agencies Disagree on BPA Safety

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BPA, a harmful component in plastic bottles

Government agencies are still not agreed on the safety of bisphenol A (also known as BPA or 'everywhere chemicals'), a chemical used in hundreds of consumer products including plastic baby bottles and canned foods. The disagreement stems from the insufficiency of scientific evidence compelling enough to warrant an outright ban.

BPA is a component of polycarbonate plastics (to make them shatterproof) and of epoxy resins (to help prevent corrosion in metals).

The panel of scientists involved in the National Toxicology Program (NTP) approved Wednesday, June 11, the bulk of the NTP draft report first released for review in April.

The report expressed "some concern" about the effects of BPA on nervous systems and behavior of fetuses, infants and children at the current levels of exposure. There was also "some concern" for BPA effects on the prostate gland. A statement of "minimal concern" was expressed for its effects on mammary glands and female puberty.

Consumer groups have pressed for a ban on BPA, citing animal studies that indicate the chemical can trigger precancerous growths and developmental problems. Safety Issues covered this controversy on BPA and phthalates on November 1, 2007.

The Food and Drug Administration, however, has a different conclusion. Using two previous studies as basis, it appears that the current levels of BPA exposure are "well below" the levels that could lead to health effects among children and infants, according to the FDA Associate Commissioner for Science. For this reason, the agency saw no compelling reason to have BPA removed from consumer products.

The FDA acknowledges that there is need to conduct more research to resolve the scientific issues. It has formed a task force to review the results of all current research, including the NTP report.

BPA tends to leach out of the plastic containers. Thus, about 95% of Americans have detectable levels of BPA in their urine, according to studies by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Each year, U.S.-based producers (mainly Dow Chemical and Bayer AG) manufacture over 6 million pounds of the chemical.

In the US Congress, U.S. Representative Edward Markey introduced a bill Tuesday that seeks to ban BPA in all containers of food and drink. Lawmakers in the U.S. Senate want to ban it from all children's products, as well as food containers.

It is not yet known if there are safe alternatives to BPA. A chemist from the Consumer Product Safety Commission warns that banning BPA could reduce the level of protection to children's heads, eyes, and other sensitive parts, since it is used in helmets and safety goggles.

It will be some time before the science issues around BPA are resolved.

Safety Tips:

- * Use glass containers instead of plastic containers when practicable.
- * Use canned food less frequently.

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