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EcoConsumer

The hazards in our plastic

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

You don't have to be a card-carrying environmentalist to wonder about all the chemicals we're exposed to every day.

When the Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition tested 10 Washington state residents in 2005, the body of each person tested contained at least 26 toxic chemicals.

The plastics and chemical industries say it has not been proven that small amounts of toxic substances in people's bodies will do any harm. But most of us would prefer to limit the accumulation of these chemicals, especially in our children.

Let's review some of the major health concerns about food-related household plastics — and a few alternatives.

Everyday hazards?

Several organizations, including the Washington Toxics Coalition, the Institute for Children's Environmental Health (ICEH) and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), have developed guides about possible hazards from plastics, especially when used with foods and beverages.

Polyvinyl chloride, also called PVC or vinyl, poses a particular hazard to health and the environment, according to these sources. Alleged problems with PVC include dioxin emissions when PVC plastics are manufactured or burned, and "plasticizer" additives called phthalates (pronounced "thay-lates").



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Many plastics are made with polyvinyl chloride, also called PVC or vinyl, which can pose a hazard to health and the environment. Polycarbonate plastic has also been identified as potentially risky. To minimize potential effects from food-related plastics, follow these tips, suggested by several environmental organizations:

- Microwave food in glass or ceramic containers with no metallic paint. Don't heat plastic containers or plastic wrap in the microwave.
- Look at the recycling number on the bottom of the plastic container. The safest plastics for food-related uses are numbers 1, 2, 4 and 5.
- Consider the type of plastic when buying the following items, most made from PVC: baby toys, bibs and teethers; cling wraps and food containers; and children's lunch boxes. Baby bottles and water bottles are often made from polycarbonate. Look for cling wraps, baby items and other products with labels such as "No PVC," "No chlorine" or "No plasticizer."

Studies have linked phthalates to problems including lowered sperm counts and smaller genitalia in males, says the ICEH. Items made from PVC include baby toys, bibs and teethers; cling wraps and food containers; and children's lunch boxes.

Resources

Washington Toxics Coalition: www.watoxics.org

Institute for Children's Environmental Health: www.iceh.org

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy: www.healthobservatory.org

Products marked with the number 3 recycling symbol are made of PVC. (While these numbers provide a convenient way to identify certain types of plastics, not all products display the numbers.)

Some companies have recently eliminated PVC from household products and packaging.

Polycarbonate plastic has also been identified as potentially risky. Baby bottles and water bottles are often polycarbonate, which uses the number 7 recycling symbol that stands for "other plastics."

Green Guide: www.thegreenguide.com

American Chemistry Council: www.plasticsinfo.org

Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition: www.toxicfreelegacy.org

Bisphenol A, a chemical that mimics the action of the hormone estrogen, can leach from polycarbonate, says the IATP. Of 115 published animal studies, 81 percent found significant effects, including reproductive problems, from even low-level exposure to Bisphenol A, according to the IATP.

From baby bibs to cling wrap

Since studies have shown that styrene (number 6) can also leach, several environmental organizations say the safest plastics for food-related uses are numbers 1, 2, 4 and 5.

At a major-chain grocery store in Seattle recently, I found numerous examples of 3, 6 and 7 plastics, including PVC baby bibs, cling wrap that appeared to be made of PVC, polycarbonate baby bottles and "sippy cups," and many styrene products.

Consumers should avoid using any plastic containers and plastic wrap in the microwave, the IATP recommends, pointing out that the label "Microwave Safe" on a plastic container "does not mean that there is no leaching of chemicals." According to the American Chemistry Council, "Microwave Safe" means a product "has been designed to withstand microwave heat without melting or warping under normal use conditions."

Alternatives abound

For the microwave, instead choose glass containers or ceramic containers with no metallic paint.

Look for cling wraps, baby items and other products with labels such as "No PVC," "No chlorine" or "No plasticizer."

For lists of brand names of plastic products to avoid, and safer alternative brands, check the Green Guide (www.thegreenguide.com), an environmental resource recently acquired by National Geographic.

Alternatives to polycarbonate water bottles include metal or number 2 or 4 reusable plastic water bottles. Instead of polycarbonate food containers, consider glass or number 5 reusable plastic containers.

If you have concerns about companies using plastics 3, 6 or 7 in their products or packaging, e-mail or call (usually toll-free) to let them know.

The EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.

watson@metrokc.gov or 206-296-4481. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.

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