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## Be wary, not alarmist, about chemicals in household products

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Here's what people really want to know: Are chemicals in household products a health risk for me or my kids?

The inability to get an answer to that question drives consumers crazy. Today's column won't answer it conclusively either, but we can at least provide some insight into the debate over toxics in consumer products.

**Q.** Environmental groups say many chemicals are health hazards in food packaging, cosmetics, household-cleaning products and more. But manufacturers say there isn't a problem. Whom do we believe?

**A.** Neither, at least not completely. Manufacturers and industry trade groups always have a financial self-interest, which can cause them to ignore or minimize concerns. Activist environmental groups (and companies selling "greener" products) may stoke consumers' fears as a way to increase their own financial support and influence. University researchers and government staff may have less of a financial stake in the debate, but they can be biased as well.

When deciding whether a product or packaging is reasonably safe, don't rely on a single source of information. Listen to both sides to determine which has the most persuasive argument and supporting studies.

**Q.** What are the broad product-safety positions on each side?

**A.** Industry's perspective includes these main points:

- Chemicals improve our lives by making products more effective and useful. If chemicals are determined to be unsafe, they are removed from products.
- Various chemicals from products or packaging may be present in our bodies at any given time, but in most cases we just pee them out, so they don't build up.
- Alternatives to the chemicals in question are not any better, or are not available.
- The margin of safety is adequate for the questioned chemicals, and this is backed up by research.

And here's what environmental groups typically say:

- Since companies in the United States are generally not required to have chemicals tested for safety before they are used in products and packaging, abuses are bound to occur.
- Little is known about health effects when different chemicals interact in people's bodies.
- Infants are so vulnerable to even small amounts of chemicals that we should not accept any risk to babies or pregnant women.
- The margin of safety is not adequate for the questioned chemicals, and this is backed up by research.

**Q.** I see this isn't going to be easy. Let's look at a real-life example. What's the story with microwave-popcorn bags?

**A.** Chemicals used in these bags to prevent grease from soaking into the paper can form a chemical called perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA). The activist organization Environmental Working Group claims this chemical could get into the popcorn we eat. Other food packaging and consumer products also contain PFOA.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says PFOA "is found at very low levels both in the environment and in the blood of the general U.S. population, remains in people for a very long time (and) causes developmental and other adverse effects in laboratory animals." ([www.epa.gov/oppt/pfoa](http://www.epa.gov/oppt/pfoa)) At the EPA's request, eight major manufacturers are voluntarily phasing out their use of PFOA-related chemicals.

However, it's not known how many microwave-popcorn bags still contain these chemicals. The EPA has not recommended that consumers do anything to reduce exposure to PFOA. In 2008, the California Legislature approved a law banning PFOA in popcorn bags and other food packaging, but Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed it, saying he would prefer broader product-safety regulations, not "chemical-by-chemical" bans.

**Q.** So what's a consumer to do when the safety of chemicals is disputed?

**A.** Especially when kids are involved, for example in the debate over the chemical Bisphenol-A in plastic baby bottles, there's probably no reason not to choose safer alternatives when available ([www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/alternatives](http://www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/alternatives)).

We don't need to be alarmist or paranoid, but we do need to keep asking questions. Because we have the ultimate power over products: to buy or not to buy.

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