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EcoConsumer

Eco-friendly answers to your consumer questions

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Tom Watson answers a few readers' questions regarding earlier columns. Read more of his columns at www.seattletimes.com/living.

Q: Could you shed some light on LED light bulbs? The long life with low-electricity usage make them sound interesting, but the ones I've read about are expensive!

A: For now, it makes the most sense to replace incandescent light bulbs with energy-efficient compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), as my March 3 column noted. But light-emitting diodes, or LEDs, clearly have a bright future in home lighting.

Twice as energy-efficient as incandescents, LEDs boast an amazingly long life span, often 10 years or more. Unlike CFLs, they don't contain mercury — a significant environmental advantage.

But as you point out, the price of LEDs is a deal-breaker for most home uses. A LED bulb that puts out a decent amount of light costs \$45 to \$100.

Another problem with LEDs: They send out their light in a single stream. That makes them great for a focused spotlight application, but not so hot for a living-room



JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY IMAGES

A traditional incandescent light bulb, right, and an energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulb. Justin Sullivan / Getty Images

lamp.

As manufacturers develop cheaper, more versatile LEDs for the home over the next few years, they will likely become a worthy competitor to CFLs. Both these technologies have immense potential to combat global warming and reduce consumers' electric bills.

Q: I put my kids' snacks and lunch food in plastic Ziploc bags. Would you please let me know what "number" plastic Ziplocs are? I would like to know if they are safe.

A: The May 19 column described concerns about leaching of toxins in plastics from some items, such as certain types of cling wraps and food containers. Plastic products and packaging are often identified by a number and the recycling symbol, which tells what type of plastic they are.

Ziploc and Glad, two of the most popular brands of sandwich bags, are made from No. 4 low-density polyethylene (LDPE) plastic. This means they are a sensible choice, since LDPE plastic has not been shown to leach.

Q: I have several white plastic outdoor chairs that have been left outside for several years and are dirty-looking and uncomfortable to sit on. I would like to get rid of them without sending them to a landfill. Is there some place that will recycle them? I doubt anyone would want to reuse them.

A: You are probably referring to those stackable, one-piece, molded plastic patio chairs you see everywhere. Millions have been sold worldwide. They even found one in Saddam Hussein's hideout. Often costing under \$5, these chairs are usually made from No. 5 polypropylene plastic.

All plastics are technically recyclable, as my June 2 column pointed out. But in the real world, no programs exist to recycle old plastic chairs. Possibly someone could put a cover or cushions on them and reuse them. If not, those chairs will have to go into the garbage.

In the future, consider paying a little more on an outdoor chair that will not look dirty as quickly, and will last longer. This can save you money in the long run, and reduce waste.

Q: When I had some pain killers (a controlled substance) left over after surgery, the only way I could think to dispose of them was to grind them up, mix them with shredded paper and burn them in a metal can. I'm a little concerned about mixing any drug with water and kitty litter and putting it in the garbage (which your May 5 column mentioned as an alternative if no drug take-back program exists in your area). Doesn't that just end up in the ground water?

A: If you mix your old drugs with a little water and then an absorbent material (such as kitty litter or flour), the idea is that the material soaks it up so it is no longer a liquid. This keeps people and animals from getting into it, and makes it easier to double-bag it and put it in the garbage.

Any materials, even liquids, that go into a modern landfill should not end up in the groundwater. Landfills are now required to have plastic liners and an extensive collection system for leachate, the liquid produced when rainwater filters through the landfill.

Burning your old drugs is not recommended, for safety and air-quality reasons.

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.