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## EcoConsumer

# Coated pots and pans can present health hazards

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*Special to The Seattle Times*



It's easy to guard against the obvious kitchen dangers, such as a hot stove or sharp knives. But when you hear that pots and pans may be toxic, what do you do then? Give up and just order takeout?

The good news is that most cookware will not put you at risk during normal use. But you do need to be aware of potential hazards with nonstick pots and pans. To make sure you don't cook up problems along with your scrambled eggs, follow these guidelines when buying and using cookware:

- **Make sure nonstick pans stay nontoxic.** The coating on nonstick cookware contains a chemical called polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE). DuPont's Teflon is the most well-known brand. When heated to very high temperatures, this coating creates hazardous fumes.

The synthetic chemical perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) is used to make this nonstick coating and has various other industrial applications. PFOA can cause cancer and birth defects in animals and may pose a risk to humans, according to Consumer Reports. The Society of the Plastics Industry, a major trade group, acknowledges that PFOA is found in the blood of 95 percent of the U.S. population "and is persistent in the environment, even in remote locations."

However, it appears that problems with nonstick pans occur only after overheating. Lab tests recently conducted by Consumer Reports showed that when new and aged pans were heated to 400 degrees, no significant emissions of PFOA occurred.

If you use nonstick pans, you should be able to cook meat or eggs just fine if you heat the pan to medium (300 to 400 degrees) and then reduce it to low (200 to 300 degrees). DuPont does not recommend heating Teflon pans higher than 500 degrees.

Remind everyone in your household to be vigilant when using nonstick cookware. A preheated pan on high heat can exceed 600 degrees in two to five minutes, according to the Environmental Working Group (EWG).

- **Keep the birds flying.** Birds have extreme sensitivity to fumes from nonstick pans. In the past 25 years, nonstick cookware heated at high temperatures has been linked to the deaths of hundreds of pet birds, EWG says.

Since all it takes is one distraction to result in an overheated pan, the Green Guide recommends bird owners replace all nonstick cookware. They should also avoid using nonstick cookie sheets, Teflon-lined ovens and burners lined with Teflon drip pans.

The fumes from overheated nonstick cookware that kill pet birds can also produce flu-like symptoms in humans. Make sure your kitchen is well-ventilated.

- **Don't get flaky.** Particles from older nonstick pans can chip off and get into food. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has stated that these particles would pass through the body and not pose a health hazard. DuPont also insists these particles will not cause harm when ingested.

Still, I'd rather use salt and pepper. Get rid of nonstick pans when they start to flake. Consumer Reports says flaking can result in uneven heating that may accelerate toxic emissions.

Even if your pans have not started flaking, the Green Guide recommends replacing nonstick cookware after two years, since the coating may then begin to degrade.

- **Plan your new pans.** Nonstick pans certainly have advantages. You can use less oil and butter when cooking, which helps you eat healthier. You also may need less soap and water to clean them.

But because of the risks from overheating nonstick pans, consider alternatives when it's time to replace them.

The Seattle-based Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition and other experts recommend stainless-steel, cast-iron and enameled cast-iron cookware as the best options.

Although you may have to "season" cast-iron by heating and greasing it to reduce future sticking, these days you can also find cast-iron pans preseasoned, ready to use.

Anodized aluminum cookware has also been suggested as an alternative. Although some inconclusive studies have linked aluminum to Alzheimer's disease, cooking in an anodized aluminum pan should not add any aluminum to food.

If you spend a little more money on durable cookware without nonstick coatings, you can have pots

and pans that last a lifetime, reducing waste and reducing risk.

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