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Are we poisoning our kids?

Everyday household products can harm your family

Chicago Parent, Jean Dunning

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Norma Zuckerman's daughter used to wake up after nap time at school in pain. "At the end of my daughter's kindergarten year, the school nurse told me that everyday after lunch, during nap, my daughter would come to her office complaining that her head was stuffed up and that she had a headache," says the retired school psychologist from Skokie.

"What we later found out was that my daughter was reacting to the cleaning materials and the dust in the rug when she laid on it for nap time," says Zuckerman, who realized her daughter had chemical sensitivity.

That was 10 years ago. Since then, Zuckerman has come to realize the products in her own home also were irritating her daughter. So, she replaced many chemical-based cleaners with less toxic versions. Zuckerman now hires Eco Conscious Housekeepers, a cleaning company that works with very low to nontoxic products-most of the homemade cleaners your grandmother used.

"Chemical sensitivity can be caused by massive overexposure that can be in a large dose at one time or in smaller amounts over a long period of time," says Dr. Robert Boxer, an allergist and immunologist on staff at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge.

The National Academy of Sciences estimates that about 15 percent of the population has some type of chemical sensitivity.

This is tied to the level of synthetic chemicals in household products and furniture, according to *The Safe Shopper's Bible: A Consumer's Guide to Nontoxic Household Products, Cosmetics, and Food* by David Steinman and Samuel S. Epstein.

Even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lists indoor air pollution as one of the nation's most pressing personal health concerns.

Boxer says people who are chemically sensitive can react to even low-level toxins with symptoms ranging from headache or nasal congestion to an asthma attack. "Some might not be able to focus, think or talk. Some experience extreme fatigue."

We know a lot about what is toxic. But what we know is outweighed by what we don't.

Is it safe?

If it's on the shelf-it's safe. Right?

Not according to Lynn Lawson, author of *Staying Well in a Toxic World*. "More than 85,000 new chemicals have been added to our economy since World War II, and 7,000 of those have chlorine in them, which is known to have effects on skin, breathing and headaches," says Lawson.

She suggests Steinman and Epstein's book as a great 464-page reference for many common household products and whether they contain known carcinogens, toxins or neurotoxins. Windex, for example, is listed as having neurotoxins, says Lawson.

And she won't use bleach-at all. "We just don't need it to clean our clothes or our dishes," says

Lawson.

But not everyone sounds the warnings as loud as Lawson.

"This really is a controversial issue," says Dr. Andrea Carlson an emergency physician and toxicologist at Advocate Christ Medical Center and Hope Children's Hospital in Oak Lawn. "There are people who fall on both sides of the spectrum-from those who don't worry at all to those who won't allow cleaners in the house."

Carlson says, "People should not be afraid to clean the house. Most cleaners are relatively safe if used as directed and in a properly ventilated area." The exposure with cleaning products-as long as a product is not swallowed-is really minimal. She does, however, warn that those who are chemically sensitive or have asthma could react to even low levels of exposure.

But, according to Ken Giles from the Consumer Product Safety Commission, everything you need to know is on the label. The government has strict guidelines and requires companies list known hazardous ingredients including those that are toxic, flammable, caustic, irritating, sensitizing, carcinogenic or can damage nervous or reproductive systems. "It is all on the label. You just have to read it and follow the directions properly."

Zuckerman and Lawson say that isn't good enough. Most consumers don't read the ingredients. Even if they did, most wouldn't know what to avoid and trying to find out can turn into a major research project.

One thing everyone agrees on: There hasn't been enough research on the long term effects of certain chemicals found in household products.

And there is even less research about the effects of these chemicals on children. For parents, the scariest thing to discover is that a product with "acceptable amounts" of toxins refers to acceptable adult levels. There is often no information about the effect of the toxin on a 20-, 30- or 60-pound developing child. Nor is there information about the possible commutative effect of toxic build-up in a child's body.

Liz Moore says chemicals are being absorbed into our bodies and staying with us. Just how long, we don't know. Moore is with the Environmental Working Group in Washington, D.C., an advocacy coalition of scientists, engineers, lawyers and policy people that does environmental investigations of government studies. Although the group's studies also focus only on adults, Moore says the results should lead us to be concerned about the effects on children.

Exposing hidden chemicals

Of the research that has been done, some of it is unsettling. Such as the toxic substances in some of the things we use daily in our homes-things that many of us would never consider to be toxic and things that don't come with ingredient labels.

For example, flame-retardant chemicals penta and octa, are found in computers, TVs, cars and furniture, and are considered safe at certain levels. Yet, the Environmental Working Group found unexpectedly high levels when it tested breast milk samples from 20 first-time mothers in 14 states. The levels were on a par with those that produced toxic effects in several studies using laboratory animals.

Research on laboratory animals linked exposure to these flame retardants to thyroid problems, impaired learning and memory, behavioral changes, hearing deficits, delayed puberty, decreased sperm count, fetal malformations and possibly cancer, according to the report. (None of this is evidence to stop breastfeeding. In fact, past studies suggest breastfeeding may reverse some of the damage caused by in utero chemical exposures.)

The information gained by the study was so powerful that Great Lakes Chemical Corp. of Indianapolis voluntarily agreed to take penta and octa off the market and replace them with less toxic substitutes.

In 2002, Coming Clean, the Environmental Working Group and Health Care Without Harm listed 34 products containing phthalates, a known toxin that has been linked to birth defects, in a full-page ad in the New York Times.

All are well-known brand-name personal products found on grocery store shelves including Aqua Net Hair Spray, Salon Selectives Hair Mouse and Dove Solid Anti-Perspirant as well as products made from soft polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, also known as vinyl. PVC products include flooring, shower curtains, wallpaper, food containers, certain paints, pesticides and printing inks. (Visit www.nottoopretty.org [1] for a complete list and alternatives.)

The groups hoped to let women know there is credible fear that a fetus could be effected if exposed to such chemicals during critical developmental stages. Phthalates, which can be absorbed through the skin, inhaled as fumes or ingested when children bite or suck on toys, can damage the lungs, liver and kidneys and harm the developing testes of offspring.

Those who produce the products argue that the levels of phthalates in most products are low, which may be true. But Lawson says so many products contain this chemical that the overall daily exposure could easily exceed acceptable levels.

Some companies have responded. Revlon and L'Oreal USA, two major cosmetic companies, have promised to abide by stricter guidelines.

"We're glad to see that some companies are taking the initiative and offering safer products. We hope more companies follow suit," says Moore. "But more importantly, there needs to be a change in the way the U.S. government oversees chemicals.

They need to be tested before being put on the market in the first place."

Are more regulations needed?

So, who's at fault here? If it's a fragrance or cosmetic, it falls under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Ken Giles of the Consumer Product Safety Commission writes in an e-mail. If it's a household cleaning product, Giles' agency handles it. And the EPA's "Glossary of Household Products with Hazards from A to Z" is on at www.epa.gov [2].

Some of what you will find:

*Bleach. It's a strong corrosive that that can irritate the skin, eyes and respiratory tract; vapors can cause fluid in the lungs which can lead to coma or death. (Note: Never mix bleach with ammonia or other acids, even vinegar. It causes deadly fumes.)

*Air fresheners. Many contain formaldehyde, a carcinogen. Some contain phenol, small amounts of which can cause cold sweats, convulsions, circulatory collapse, coma and, in extreme cases, death. Most air fresheners work by either masking the one scent with another or by interfering with your ability to smell by releasing a nerve-deadening agent.

*Carpet and upholstery shampoos. Some contain perchloroethylene, a known carcinogen that can damage the liver, kidneys and various systems.

*Furniture polish. Many contain nitrobenzene, a chemical that is easily absorbed through the skin. Repeated exposure can cause genetic changes, birth defects, cancer, liver, kidney, heart and central nervous system damage.

There are nontoxic cleaning products available, but Lawson says, just because products use words such as "natural," "fresh," "gentle," "simple" and, in some cases, even "nontoxic," you still need to turn the bottle over and read the ingredients.

"Companies can say pretty much what ever they want to," explains Lawson. "For instance, labels that say 'unscented' or 'fragrance-free' on the front can say 'masking fragrance added' on the back."

Use household products safely

Tips from The Safe Shopper's Bible: A Consumer's Guide to Nontoxic Household Products, Cosmetics, and Food by David Steinman and Samuel S. Epstein.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.nottoopretty.org>

[2] <http://www.epa.gov>