Bisphenol A: Is it safe?

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The controversy over bisphenol A—the chemical used to make many hard plastic toys, bottles and food containers—has left many consumers wondering what to do. As the ever-growing debate about the potential health effects of BPA rages on, consumers are puzzled as to whether they should keep or throw out products made with this chemical.

On the one hand, recent animal studies suggest that BPA may be linked to obesity, infertility and insulin-resistance in rodents. On the other hand, the plastics industry—including bottle maker Nalgene—vigorously defends the chemical, noting it has been used widely for 50 years.

Meanwhile, Health Canada, which has for some time said that the chemical poses no health risks, is set to release a preliminary report on BPA in May 2008.

What is bisphenol A?

Bisphenol A is a chemical compound found in some hard, clear, lightweight plastics and resins. It is used in the production of various types of food and drink containers, compact discs, electronics and automobile parts, and as a liner in some metal cans.

How do I know if my container contains bisphenol A?

Some polycarbonate containers are marked with the code number 7 on the bottom, but this doesn't necessarily mean that the item contains BPA. If unsure, call the manufacturer and ask about the BPA content in the product.

What does research suggest about exposure to BPA?

Animal studies suggest that, once ingested, BPA may imitate estrogen and other hormones. It’s possible that, even in low doses, the chemical can increase breast and ovarian cancer cell growth, and the growth of some prostate cancer cells in animals.

Some researchers found that when BPA was administered to pregnant mice it altered a gene responsible for normal uterine development. They said that, “If pregnant women are exposed to the estrogen-like properties found in BPA, it may impact female reproductive tract development and the future fertility of female fetuses the mother is carrying.”

What is Health Canada's take on the chemical?

Health Canada is conducting a survey of several research projects involving BPA and will publish their findings in the spring of 2008.

While acknowledging concerns over the chemical, Health Canada's pre-evaluation take on bisphenol A plays down potential health effects. On its website, the department says only residual levels of BPA are found in consumer products, because most of it is consumed during the manufacturing process.

"Analysis and testing conducted by Health Canada in 2000/2001 on plastic baby feeding bottles and other plastic products showed that the levels of bisphenol A in these products were exceedingly low, and did not present a risk to Canadian children," it said.

"Health Canada's investigation also showed that although low amounts of bisphenol A could migrate from the plastic into milk, it would do so only under conditions of extreme use.… These results suggest that plastic products do not pose a health risk if used properly."

How have Canadian retailers responded?

In December 2007, Vancouver-based Mountain Equipment Co-op became the first major Canadian retailer to pull polycarbonate containers from its store shelves. Tim Southam, a company spokesman, said consumers had expressed concern about the chemical.

Lululemon Athletica Inc., also Vancouver-based, announced plans later the same month to stop selling plastic water bottles that contain bisphenol A. Lululemon said it had followed the issue for more than a year before deciding it would switch to new water bottles made of acrylic.

What alternatives can I use?

Use glass, stainless steel or porcelain containers, especially for hot food or liquids. For baby bottles, choose glass or look for hard plastic bottles without bisphenol A. They can be found at health food stores and some baby stores. For preserved goods, opt for glass jars or canned goods that do not contain liners made with BPA.

Adapted from: http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/health/bisphenol-a.html

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Follow-up Questions

1. What does BPA stand for? Where is it found?

2. Why are consumers becoming concerned about BPA?

3. Why do you think the plastics industry “vigorously defends the chemical”?

4. Why is Health Canada doing further studies before saying whether or not BPA is a danger to health?

5. Go to the Health Canada web site (http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) and search for information about BPA. Is there any new information since this article was written? If so, say briefly what it is.

6. “. . . plastic products do not pose a health risk if used properly.” Find out what ‘used properly’ means.

7. What is your opinion on the issue of BPA in food containers?