Should I be concerned about plastics?

Plastics are found everywhere: in food containers, car seats, telephones, computers, toys, cups, floor coverings, windows, and drain pipes – the list is endless. Plastics are such an integral part of our daily lives that it’s almost impossible to conceive how we could function without them. We assume that plastic products are safe, but are they?

The chemicals and processes used to create certain plastics can be highly toxic, affecting not only our groundwater and the air we breathe, but also leaching (slowly dissolving or migrating) into packaged foods, bottled water, and even our skin upon handling them. This column focuses on the health effects of three toxicants in plastic: phthalates (pronounced “THA-lates”), dioxins, and bisphenol-A (pronounced “BIS-fe-noll A”). Strategies for reducing exposures and using alternatives are also provided.

Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic, phthalates and dioxins

Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) is derived from vinyl chloride. More than 60 percent of PVC plastic is used to make construction materials such as vinyl siding, piping, decking, flooring, roofing membranes and electrical cables^1^. PVC is also used in medical supplies such as IV bags and tubing; household items such as upholstery, shower curtains, rain coats and plastic food wraps; and children’s products such as bath toys, waterproof baby books, rattles, balls, and bean bag pellets.

PVC is a hard plastic that is made softer and more flexible when blended with plasticizers called phthalates. Phthalates are toxic chemicals that are known to leach from PVC plastics and cause various health problems.

When PVC plastics are manufactured and again during waste incineration, toxic chemicals called dioxins are released into the air, settle to the ground and enter the food chain and water systems. PVC is a major contributor to dioxin release, with seven billion pounds discarded as household, medical, construction and demolition waste annually in the US.

Some hospitals are now beginning to use alternatives to PVC plastics because of the widespread harm it causes to our health and the environment.

Polycarbonate plastic and bisphenol-A

Polycarbonate is a type of hard, clear plastic that is commonly used for medical storage containers, hospital incubators, water bottles, baby bottles, and linings in food cans. Bisphenol-A is a chemical used in the manufacture of polycarbonate plastic and is widely used to make the inside coatings of household water tanks and in plastic dental sealants.

What health problems are associated with these chemicals?

Phthalates

Phthalates are associated with a variety of health problems. In males, phthalates are associated with undescended testicles and smaller genitalia at birth, lowered sperm counts, benign testicular tumors later
in life, and reduced blood levels of testosterone. In girls, phthalates are associated with premature breast development. Phthalates are also carcinogenic (cause cancer) and are linked to both asthma and allergies. Phthalates may cause damage to the liver, kidneys and heart as well.

Preliminary research of the developmental and cognitive (brain) effects of phthalates has shown that phthalates impair the function of the pituitary and thyroid glands. Because thyroid health is essential for proper brain development, it is likely that research currently underway will show that phthalates contribute to problems in neurological and brain development.

Phthalates interfere with the hormones that determine the physical characteristics of males and females. These hormones also influence cognitive differentiation (spatial learning, perception and memory) and behavior (social play, aggression and hyperactivity).

**Dioxins**

Dioxins are associated with cancer, diabetes, endometriosis, birth defects, infertility, and immune-system depression. Dioxins are also associated with impaired thyroid function. The thyroid gland controls synapse development and neuron formation in the brain. Even small disruptions of a mother’s thyroid hormone levels at certain points in her pregnancy may cause problems with the child’s motor coordination, balance, and other psychomotor skills; spatial relation; perception; memory and language.

**Bisphenol-A**

Bisphenol-A disrupts proper hormone functioning, alters genes and disrupts normal physical and behavioral development. In animal studies bisphenol-A has been linked to a variety of reproductive problems in both males and females; birth defects; obesity; behavioral disorders such as hyperactivity, impulsiveness and aggression; abnormal brain structure and chemistry; impaired immune function and a variety of cancers. Recent “body burden” studies have shown bisphenol-A to be present in the urine and blood of a wide range of people. Of great concern is the fact that the levels found in humans are much greater than levels that caused problems in animal studies.

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**Routes of exposure to the chemicals in plastics**

People are exposed to phthalates, dioxins, and bisphenol-A in a variety of ways.

**Out-gassing** of new PVC is one way phthalates enter our bodies. The “new car smell” and the smell of a new shower curtain are examples of PVC out-gassing. When used as a building material, PVC poses risks for its potential to release toxic fumes when exposed to high temperatures.

Dioxins are released during waste incineration and settle to the ground, affecting groundwater, pastures and farms. Dioxins and phthalates are fat-soluble chemicals, which means that they remain in fat cells rather than get processed out of the body through the kidneys or liver. Fatty meats such as chicken and beef contain phthalates and dioxins, which then build up in the fat cells of people who eat these meats.

Bisphenol-A leaches into foods and liquids stored in polycarbonate plastic and plastic-lined containers or water tanks. The older the polycarbonate plastic container, the greater the leaching activity. Temperature affects the amount of leaching from these containers, with higher temperatures (as from dishwashing or boiling) increasing leaching. Phthalates leach into foods from plastic packaging as well.

All these chemicals also pass from mother to child in the womb across the placenta and are present in breast milk. Nevertheless, breastfeeding is the still the best possible food for infants for many other reasons.

Babies are also exposed to these chemicals when they mouth plastic toys, drink baby formula from cans lined with plastic resins, or drink from plastic baby bottles. Since fetuses and babies are particularly susceptible to the health effects of these toxic chemicals, parents should be particularly concerned about exposures both before and after birth.
Take a “Three Steps” approach to reduce and eliminate exposures

**Step 1: Avoid PVC and leaching plastics**

Plastic products are usually numbered on the bottom, indicating the type of resin used in their manufacture. Avoid PVC (#3).

Besides PVC (#3), polystyrene (#6) and other plastics (#7) are also known to leach harmful chemicals such as phthalates or bisphenol-A into the foods they contain. Avoid them.

**Step 2: Substitute Safer Plastics**

Choose non-PVC cling wrap such as Glad Wrap. Also, Saran Premium Wrap and Saran Cling-Plus Wrap do not contain PVC or bisphenol-A.

Choose #1 (PETE), #2 (HDPE), #4 (LDPE) and #5 (PP) plastics. The codes on the bottom of plastic containers indicate the type of resin used. Numbers 1, 2, 4 and 5 are safer choices since most research has not shown leaching of carcinogens or hormone-disrupting chemicals from these. However, #4 and #5 are not as widely recyclable. Some bread and frozen-food bags and squeezeable bottles are made of #4 plastic. Some ketchup bottles and yogurt and margarine containers are made of #5 plastic. Medela and Evenflo baby bottles are generally made of safer plastics.

Choose biodegradable plastics. The use of a corn-based biodegradable plastic called polylactide (PLA) is growing. For example, Wild Oats supermarket chain replaced its bulk food containers with PLA. Biodegradable garbage bags and disposable dinnerware are now available for home use (see www.simplybiodegradable.com or www.trellisearth.com). Ask your grocery and other retail store managers to provide biodegradable plastic bags for customers.

**Step 3: Use Alternatives to Plastic**

Glass, ceramic and stoneware do not leach chemicals into foods. Glass recycling is also more environmentally friendly than plastics recycling. (Note: Some foreign-made ceramics use a lead-based glaze, introducing other potential health risks. When in doubt, check with the manufacturer.)

Instead of disposables, use canvas shopping bags or dinnerware made from bamboo or other environmentally friendly materials.

Stainless steel containers are both inexpensive and 100% recyclable and will not react with foods during cooking.

Wax paper sandwich bags are an alternative to plastic sandwich bags.

Wood cutting boards are preferable to plastic. Clean your cutting board with vinegar to kill bacteria after each use.

For more information or for other Practice Prevention columns, visit the Learning and Developmental Disabilities Initiative online at www.disabilityandenvironment.org or call 360-331-7904.
Additional Resources

- Adverse Health Effects of Plastics, www.ecologycenter.org/fact_sheets/plastichealtheffects.html
- Researcher Dispels Myth of Dioxins and Plastic

Footnoted resources


