

Household toxins: Toying with our safety

BY AMY O'BRIAN, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 7, 2009 COMMENTS (18)

STORY PHOTOS (1)



Slow Death by Rubber Duck
Photograph by: How the Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Life Affects Our Health, How the Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Life Affects Our Health

rubber duck's long history as a kid-friendly bath-time toy is coming to an end.

Exposed by Rick Smith and Bruce Lourie as a dangerously toxic little plaything, the rubber duck is now becoming something of a symbol for the hidden poisons that lie within so many of our favourite everyday objects, products and foods.

In their new, best-selling book *Slow Death by Rubber Duck: How the Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Life Affects our Health*, Smith and Lourie expose the toxic makeup of everyday items ranging from bed sheets to toothpaste to antibacterial hand cleansers.

"People have a profound sense that something has gone terribly wrong in terms of consumer product safety in this country and they're concerned," Smith said in a phone interview with his Toronto office. "That was the point of the book — to really demonstrate that what we buy and what we use in our homes on a daily basis really matter; they really have a direct impact on the level of pollution in our bodies and perhaps more importantly, the level of pollution in our kids."

To hammer their point home — and to make it incredibly personal — Smith and Lourie spent a week as experimental guinea pigs. They exposed themselves to pollutants that many people expose themselves to on a daily basis.

They stayed in a condo with a carpet and couch recently treated with a stain-resistant coating. They plugged in an air freshener. They washed their hair and brushed their teeth with common drugstore products. Smith ate lunch from a plastic container heated in the microwave. Lourie ate several meals of tuna. And they both washed their hands with antibacterial hand soap.

The results from their blood and urine samples were shocking — even to Smith and Lourie, who are long-time environmentalists, fully versed in the dangers of many everyday household products.

Most shocking to Smith were his own triclosan levels, which were 3,000 times higher after just two days of using products containing the antibacterial and antifungal agent.

"I was blown away by my triclosan results," he said. "As a society, our exposure to this stuff has gone through the roof."

Triclosan is found in many toothpastes, hand soaps, deodorants, and even socks and garden hoses. It can weaken the immune system, cause thyroid problems and possibly cancer, and is thought to contribute to bacterial resistance and the rise of superbugs.

Smith notes that alcohol-based hand sanitizers are fine, but said the ballooning use of triclosan in a variety of products is a "big problem."

Smith and Lourie focused on six other toxins that are found in everyday items, some of which are easily flushed from the body and others that linger much longer.

Among those that are processed and expelled by the body relatively quickly are phthalates — often found in scented shampoos and soaps — and bisphenol A, which is used in hard plastics and was recently banned for use in baby bottles by the Canadian government.

Bisphenol A, also known as BPA, is also found in the lining of pop cans, food cans and cans used for infant formula.

"BPA is a particularly big one to avoid," Smith said. "Since the 1930s, it's been known to be a hormone disrupting chemical. And it's particularly harmful for kids."

Smith said BPA can contribute to breast cancer and the early onset of puberty, among other health problems. But while phthalates and BPA can be flushed from the body within days, other chemicals are not as willing to leave. Smith said triclosan and mercury tend to linger for a few months, but Teflon and other non-stick coatings — which are applied to everything from frying pans to microwave popcorn bags and pizza boxes — can stay in the body forever.

"It's almost diabolical," Smith said. "It's not broken down by any natural process. Once it's in our bodies, it's in there for good."

The good news out of all this, however, is that governments are moving quickly to ban some of these dangerous toxins. And it is relatively easy to remove most of these harmful products from your daily life.

"There are a couple of easy things to do," Smith said. "Microwaving in plastic. Just don't do it. Never do it."

Avoid using hard, transparent plastics with the number seven on the bottom of them — they're likely made with BPA. Try to buy items packaged in glass — rather than aluminum or plastic — whenever possible. Try to buy unscented soaps and shampoos. And replace all your non-stick pans with cast-iron cookware.

"I am very optimistic," Smith said. "We work in this area every day and there are massive changes going on, very positive changes."

aobrian@vancouver.sun.com

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YOUR COMMENTS

shirley nakamura

June 10, 2009 - 12:28 PM

Flag this as Inappropriate

Consumerism is over the top. It is up to the individual to stop it -- stop buying all this consumer "junk" that is out there, put on the shelves by profiting multinationals. How about practicing natural, simple, organics -- who needs a Swiffer when a mop and pail will do, who needs whitening toothpaste when salt and water will do, who needs Glade Air Infusions when a fan will do, who needs frozen food in plastic when a fresh steamed will do, etc. Go simple, natural, organic.

Kevin

June 08, 2009 - 9:40 AM

Flag this as Inappropriate

How does the fact we're living longer, healthier lives fit in with all this gloom and doom? I'm almost 60. By the time my father was that age, he had already been undergoing cancer treatment of the day for ten years. Must have been those damn bakelite duckies and cast iron frying pans! Maybe it just seems we're having more illness now, because we're better at detecting it before it's too late and treating it. I'm sure a lot of people died in the '40s and 50s in blissful ignorance of what illness was killing them. Anecdotal, I know, but give it a break.

bob

June 08, 2009 - 9:10 AM

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Yes, ingesting everyday foods may elevate certain chemicals in the blood stream. However, unless there is a reference point, the numbers are meaningless. Is the elevated level of triclosan (3000 x normal) dangerous? Hopefully the book will state what is safe - not just the author's opinion, but facts supported by independent research. If not, the book is just fear mongering.

annemarie

June 08, 2009 - 8:47 AM

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It's sad that we so readily swallow everything new that is touted to enhance our lives. We need to get back to what nature provided for us in the first place. Let's pay attention. Forget what the producers of chemically ridden products and containers tell us about their toxic offerings. Get back to the simple, basic lives of our forefathers: get clean and go green--inside and out!

na2

June 08, 2009 - 7:38 AM

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If our governments weren't controlled by industry, they would do something!

na

June 08, 2009 - 7:32 AM

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should also mention the bromines outgassing from the computer you're reading this on!

Steven L

June 08, 2009 - 6:28 AM

Flag this as Inappropriate

Instead of attacking their science, you lump them together with fad science. not very genuine at all.

deborahg

June 08, 2009 - 6:15 AM

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I am going to start paying more attn to the products I consume and bring into the home, my only concern is that it's too late, I'm already contaminated.

Marilyn

June 08, 2009 - 5:39 AM

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the word about all the toxic chemicles and products that are in our life need to be spread around the public so they can make better wiser choices in the products that they use daily --we're just giving ourselves more health issues through our ignorance in the products that we use in our everyday lives

XYZ

June 08, 2009 - 4:22 AM

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"These toxins deliberately spread by some owner of Multinational public firms and the owners of those firm are having Propaganda against some nations and in the end they will make \$\$Billions\$\$ when sick people buy their medicine" Religious hardliners says.

pete

June 08, 2009 - 2:28 AM

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ALLS like robedents a paid shill of the chemical companies. why don't politicians make sure these companies test the ingredients in there products for long term toxicity in humans? They're making use their guinea pigs. how much money have chemical companies passed on to politicians so they don't put their citizens health first instead of profit at any cost, including cancer?

Toby

June 07, 2009 - 10:54 PM

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Someone.....it may be late for you, but its perfect timing for all the babies and little kids out there!

flora

June 07, 2009 - 10:40 PM

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why the government not forbid the production of those products

C.L.

June 07, 2009 - 10:29 PM

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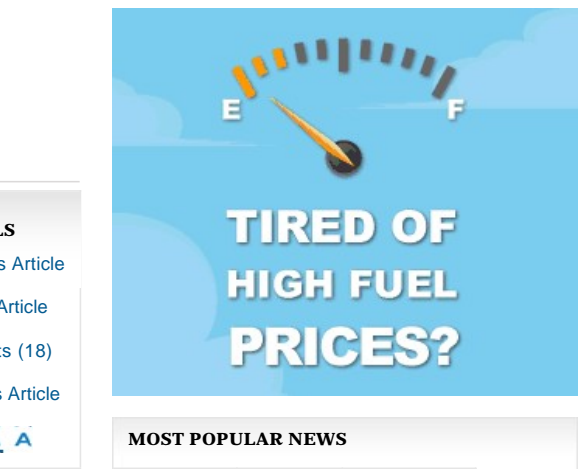
We don't use teflon frying pans and don't microwave plastic or use bubble bath and eat grass fed beef with no steroids and free range organic eggs. it costs more, but there's no chemicals. Do it or die early

dee

June 07, 2009 - 9:46 PM

Flag this as Inappropriate

let's face it, we have made ourselves the pawns in the game of corporate consumerism. so what are we going to do about it? anyone out there who believes these are scare tactics by a yellow rag better, wake up! we can blame the govts. we can blame the the corporations and even the disgusting scientific ego's and greed, who started this in the first place. we must also blame ourselves for trusting the very people who control us,(that is hardly subtle)and face the facts. we have children and and grandchildren who will inherit our stupidity, nice legacy! the corporations have no soul and neither do most govts. but i refuse to believe that most people do not care about their families. lets leave it here with the word, 'boycott' embedded in our slumber. that is if it's not too late! but, we CAN try.



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