



Kicking the Can – The Dangers of BPA

Written by Jill Grunewald and published in mix magazine, October 2011



While not the headline-grabbing topic that it has been in recent past, the bisphenol A (BPA) controversy is reheating, due appreciably to a new report from the Breast Cancer Fund. The report exposes canned soups and pastas, marketed largely to children, wherein the micro-thin barrier that prevents a can's contents from contacting the metal contains BPA, the synthetic, estrogen-like chemical in polycarbonate plastic found in the lining of nearly all food and drink cans.

Pernicious Presence

BPA - also found in baby bottles and sippy cups, microwave ovenware, stain-resistant food storage containers, eating utensils, food storage containers, hard-plastic drinking bottles, 5-gallon water jugs, and plastic wraps, to name just a few - easily leaches into food and liquids and hundreds of studies have linked it to harmful endocrine-disrupting effects, causing reproductive, developmental, behavioral, and neurological harm.

The dangers of BPA didn't become headline news until recent years, when its leaching capabilities were exposed. Many industry experts are already concerned about our food coming into contact with plastic, and when these cans, bottles, and containers are exposed to heat, the risk of exposure increases significantly, as the toxins break down, combine with our foods, and become much more easily ingestible. You heat 'em, you eat 'em.

"Everyone knows not to put metal or canned foods in the microwave," you may be thinking. But consider that canned foods are transported in non-refrigerated trucks, where temperatures can easily become extremely hot in the warmer months.

Plastics have a short life span, and washing, rinsing, and repeating, as eco-friendly and responsible as it appears, renders plastics chemically unstable. Not only does excessive heat from dishwashers and microwaves pose a significant leaching risk, but washing plastics by hand in hot water can also cause chemical decomposition and release the toxic compounds into our water supply.

Safe for Consumption?

According to SaferStates.org, "Well over 100 independent academic and government peer-reviewed studies have linked BPA to a host of problems, including brain and developmental damage, breast cancer, prostate cancer, early puberty, obesity, infertility, miscarriage, and hyperactivity. Young children and babies are particularly vulnerable because their body systems are still developing." According to Alyssa Ford, health and nutrition writer for Experience Life Magazine, "Animals exposed to BPA in utero or in early-stage development grew excess mammary tissue, which in humans is a risk factor for breast cancer later in life."

HEALTHFUL ELEMENTS



BPA has also been implicated in impaired liver function, decreased sperm count, diabetes, heart disease, cardiovascular dysfunction, and impaired thyroid function. And the damage it's doing to our oceans is worthy of everyone's attention.

Resilient, lightweight, and easily portable, it's no wonder we've become a society smothered in plastics. While the official BPA industry group web site tells us that BPA makes our lives "easier, healthier, and safer, each and every day," an ever-increasing number of scientists disagree, and BPA, which has been shown to generate adverse health effects even at low levels of exposure, is once again in the hot seat.

Over our left shoulder, we have U.S. government scientists and the chemical industry discrediting BPA's dangers, and over our right, a host of interest groups and consumers expressing outrage at a recent government study "proving" that BPA is safe. While the evidence from rat studies is overwhelming, the jury is still out on BPA's harmful effects, according to the World Health Organization. Yet it has been banned in certain products (mostly children's) in the European Union, Canada, China, and 10 states (Minnesota was the first) and beginning in 2007, many retailers voluntarily pulled all BPA-containing bottles and cans from their shelves.

"One of the problems we face when it comes to regulating toxic substances is that the EPA and the FDA aren't generally able to apply a strong 'precautionary principle' the way regulators do in Europe," says Tom Laskawy, contributing writer at Grist. "In essence, a strong precautionary principle would allow our government to act even when, as stated in a European Commission document, 'scientific evidence is insufficient, inconclusive, or uncertain.'" According to Dr. Ted Schettler of the Science and Environmental Health Network, "When you have 92 percent of the American population exposed to [BPA], this is not one where you want to be wrong. Are we going to quibble over individual rodent studies, or are we going to act?"

The researched and reported dangers of BPA are too profuse to ignore and many people are scrambling to oust it. While we may not be able to eradicate this smoking gun from our lives exclusively, there are ways to protect yourself and your family that won't make you feel like you have to live in a bubble or resort to a pre-WWII lifestyle.

Sorting It Out

Roughly 15% of Americans' diet comes from cans, both store-bought, and from foods in restaurants. Currently, Eden Organic is the only food company eschewing BPA-lined cans; they use oleoresinous c-enamel for their beans and use glass jars for their tomato products. When canned, tomatoes are especially problematic, as the high acid content of tomatoes quickly leaches BPA.

- Buy beans in bulk. Soak overnight and cook yourself. Buying in bulk tends to be more economical than packaged foods anyway.
- Buy soups and broths in Tetra Paks, the same type of boxes you'll find nut milks in. Add your own vegetables or protein to suit your taste.
- Buy foods in glass containers.

HEALTHFUL ELEMENTS



- When it comes to fruits and vegetables, local and in-season is best. Buy in bulk during the growing season and freeze or preserve for later use. But buying frozen produce is okay too, and frozen foods from plastic bags are better than from a can. Frozen fruits and vegetables are certainly a healthy and economical choice when not in season. Frozen produce is often packaged not long after harvesting, potentially offering better nutritional value than “fresh” produce, if it was harvested prematurely, warehoused, and then shipped to the store.
- Dried fruits, while higher in fructose (sugar) content, are a better choice than canned fruits.

Other ways to avoid BPA:

- Never microwave plastics or wash them in the dishwasher.
- Look for BPA-free plastic, such as plastics tagged with a #1, 2, 4, or 5. However none are considered completely safe, as some non-BPA plastics contain polystyrene, which is a possible carcinogen, and PVC, which is a vinyl.
- Use ceramic or glass containers to heat food.
- When microwaving, cover food with a paper towel, not plastic wrap.
- Scratched, cloudy, or marred plastics should be disposed of.
- Trade your plastic spatulas and other utensils for metal. “Those will scratch my nonstick cookware,” you say? Most nonsticks contain plastic polymers that emit toxic fumes, so it’s a good idea to switch them out for stainless steel or cast iron cookware.
- Never reuse single-use bottles. (Not buying them in the first place is a great idea.)
- If you purchase foods in plastic, transfer to a safe container when you get home.
- If you can, avoid plastics in the kitchen altogether.
- Probiotics, specifically the Bifidobacterium breve and Lactobacillus casei strains, bind BPA and eliminate it from the intestines. I recommend taking them daily.

Recommended reading: [*Plastic: a Toxic Love Story*](#)

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