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Reports About Plastic Contaminants Raise Parents' Concerns

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Days after Jamie and Kurt Rhodes had their first baby, Annabelle, they heard a news report last month about a new study saying clear plastic baby bottles can leach a harmful chemical into the liquid.

The Plantation couple had already stocked up with the widely used polycarbonate bottles, sippy cups and dishes, and now they're not sure whether to be worried or what to do next.

"What else are you going to use? What are your alternatives?" Jamie Rhodes said. "Glass? That can shatter. The government says [polycarbonate] is safe. The whole thing is confusing."

Controversy over the safety of polycarbonate has been around for years but has re-emerged with the release of a series of new reports from environmental groups, a coalition of scientists and an advisory panel of the National Institutes of Health that found "some concern" about danger to children.

The clear, hard substance is everywhere, used to make about 90 percent of baby bottles as well as colorful Nalgene sports bottles, microwave dishes and the epoxy in the liners of most canned food. Flexible PET plastic, used in most water and soda bottles, is not involved. While few polycarbonate baby items are labeled as such, some items can be identified by the recycling code 7 or "PC" on the bottom.

All sides in the polycarbonate debate agree that it gives off small amounts of bisphenol A, called BPA, which has been shown to cause tumors, reproductive problems and developmental damage in some animals. More than a billion pounds of BPA goes into products yearly, and federal health officials estimate that 95 percent of Americans have a little BPA in their urine.

But how much is safe?

The plastics industry and some scientists say the amount leached from PC is minuscule and no danger, while other researchers and environmental activists say BPA can harm animals at small doses. Experts on each side cite at least 100 studies in their favor.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which regulates many polycarbonate products, says it will take a close look at the new reports but so far agrees PC appears to be safe.

"The BPA levels found in canned foods or migrating out of PC baby bottles are not significantly different than the very low levels previously found by FDA chemists and other laboratories, levels that result in a dietary exposure that is orders of magnitude below the levels known to not cause toxic effects in animals," the agency said in a statement.

Several consumer groups contend the FDA's stance is little help to parents worried about risks. They called on the FDA to take a stronger stand and to make manufacturers clearly mark products so people won't have to guess what plastic they are buying.

"Once again, people are being forced to try to shop their way out of a problem, which isn't always possible," said Jane Houlihan, vice president of Environmental Working Group, an advocacy organization that favors stricter controls over polycarbonate.

Amid the new reports, parents are asking advice from all quarters. Boca Raton pediatrician Douglas Barlow said after he spent weeks reading the studies, his worry eased.

"The [government] wouldn't put these kids at risk," Barlow said. "They recall buttons, for heaven's sake."

Some mothers are committing to breastfeeding to avoid bottles as much as possible. Some are buying glass, some BPA-free plastics. Born Free, a Boca Raton company, sells bottles made of polyamide PA plastic, which has not been linked to risks.

More than 700 studies on polycarbonate have produced enough conflicting results that there is no agreement on its safety. None of the studies involved humans, only animals.

The debate flared in 1998 when a Washington State University researcher noticed lab rats that drank from polycarbonate containers developed chromosome damage. Rats stopped developing problems when she switched the bottles.

Last month, a group of 38 scientists that reviewed the research reported in the journal *Reproductive Toxicology* that BPA was of "high concern." The American Chemistry Council, which represents plastics makers, dismissed the report as the work of researchers biased against BPA.

Earlier this year, the nonprofit consumer body U.S. Public Interest Research Group examined five brands of polycarbonate baby bottles — Avent, Dr. Brown's, Evenflo, Gerber and Playtex — and found that BPA leached into the contents at levels that were low but shown to harm animals in lab studies.

The Environmental Working Group found low but "unsafe" levels of BPA in canned infant formula and also in more than half of 97 cans of fruit, vegetables and soda.

The plastics industry and some researchers responded that the BPA released from bottles and cans is so tiny — millionths of a gram per day — that PC poses no risk.

Many studies have found giving animals even high levels of PBA found no damage, said Steve Hentges, executive director of council's polycarbonate/BPA global group. Studies showing harm at low levels have had conflicting methods that undercut the results, he said.

Then an NIH advisory group reported Aug. 8 that BPA was of "some concern," posing a modest risk of neurological and behavioral harm in children and fetuses, and called for more study. Otherwise, the panel found minimal or negligible concern.

The report now will be reviewed by the NIH National Toxicology Program, which will make a report to federal health and environmental regulators next year.

Amid the conflicting information, experts worried about PBA advise not reheating food in plastic, discarding reusable items when they wear and avoiding plastic when possible.

Expectant mother Jamie Goodman decided to err on the side of caution. She deleted polycarbonate items from her gift registry.

"Why take a chance?" said Goodman, of Davie. "Everything seems to be bad for you."

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