

THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



There Are Toxics In My Clothing?!

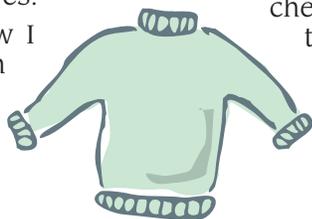
Even though I've worked on toxics issues for many years, I didn't really realize until fairly recently that toxic chemicals could be in my own clothing — and in noticeable amounts!

That is, until about a year ago, when I bought cotton sweat pants and a matching shirt from a major retailer. After I happily put them on, my skin started itching, my heartbeat became rapid, and I could barely breathe. It was so scary! I'd never experienced this before and wondered what was causing it. At first, I brushed aside the idea that it could be my new clothes. But when I took them off, the reactions quickly subsided. Wow!

Even after washing these items multiple times, and soaking them in baking soda, when I put them back on, these symptoms happened again. I considered returning the clothes to the store, but figured they wouldn't take them back because I'd washed them. (Now I realize that I could've insisted.) So I've had them in my garage for a year now, hoping they'll eventually air out enough to wear. But they still scare me a bit!

I also realized that these toxics are likely harming people and ecosystems throughout the clothes' lifecycle — at factories and stores, during transit, and through the production of the chemicals themselves.

I wanted to know how I could avoid this problem in the future, so I did some research. But unfortu-



ately I found out that the U.S. doesn't have good consumer information or controls on the toxics in clothing.

For instance, formaldehyde (an industrial strength toxic that's used to embalm the deceased) is commonly used by manufacturers to create "wrinkle-free" permanent press clothing, drapes, etc. But its use can cause people to have rashes, blisters, itching, swelling, and worse.

In 2010, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (the investigative arm of Congress) tested 180 items for formaldehyde, including shirts, pants, pillowcases, crib sheets, and a boy's baseball hat. They found that 5.5% of the items exceeded 75 parts per million, Japan's maximum allowed level for products that come in direct contact with the skin. Folks who are more "allergic" can develop rashes at levels as low as 30 parts per million.

But the U.S. government hasn't done much about this. They don't regulate formaldehyde levels in clothing (whether made here or elsewhere), or even require that its use be noted on clothing labels.

And this is just one of many toxic chemicals being used to make and treat our clothing. Brian and Anne Marie Clement in *Killer Clothes* say, "The vast majority of clothing items produced in the world today ... are either manufactured, or the fabric fibers are grown, using synthetic chemicals, many of which are toxic to human health...."

According to *The Ecologist* magazine, an estimated eight thousand

Quick Tips

■ **To learn what everyday items are toxic and where to discard them**, see www.recyclenow.org or the Yellow Pages Recycling Guide. Or call 565-3375.

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collection Day** is Tues. Dec. 18. Make an appointment at 795-2025, at least 24 hours in advance. Also, the Household Toxics Facility is open for dropoff, Thurs. through Sat., from 7:30am to 3:30pm at the Petaluma Central Disposal Site. There's no cost to County residents with ID.

■ **The TNS Online Index** lets you look up past issues by topic, revealing what's toxic and the alternatives in everything from housecleaning to pest control. www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html

chemicals are employed to transform raw materials into clothes, a process that includes bleaching, dyeing, scouring, sizing, and finishing the fabrics." Chemicals can also get on clothes during manufacture, warehousing, and transportation. But there's no way for us to know what chemicals are on a piece of clothing. The system is just not transparent!

Proposed remedies for this situation include better regulations, labeling, and further studies, including of cumulative exposure. A key way for us to encourage improvement is by supporting federal TSCA reform. (See www.saferchemicals.org.)

In the meantime, here are some ways we can better protect ourselves and our loved ones:

■ **Be cautious about buying products with claims such as:** permanent press, wrinkle-free, no iron, easy care, water repellent, flame-resistant, or anti-bacterial — unless they mention some natural reason for that benefit. Otherwise, there's probably a toxic chemical inside.

■ **Buy products made of natural fiber, ideally organic, that also list the safer processing practices used, such as "no chemical finishes" or "nontoxic dyes."** You can find options locally and online.

See *Toxics In Clothing*, over

Avoiding That Toxic New Car Smell

You know that treasured “new car smell”? Well, it likely comes from toxics! This includes materials linked to a variety of health problems, including lead, mercury, benzene, PVC (polyvinyl chloride), and BFRs (brominated flame retardants).

The average American spends over 1.5 hours in a car each day, with the sun volatilizing any toxics into the air. So this small confined space can be a major source of indoor air pollution. Eeps!

What can we do to avoid these toxics? The Ecology Center helps answer that question by annually assessing the toxicity of new car interiors. This year, researchers tested 205 of the most popular 2011-2012 model vehicles using an x-ray fluorescence analyzer — and found hundreds of toxic chemicals.

Jeff Gearhart, research director at the Ecology Center, says, “Since these chemicals are not regulated, consumers have no way of knowing the dangers they face. Our testing is



intended to expose those dangers and encourage manufacturers to use safer alternatives.”

The good news is that overall ratings are improving, with the best vehicles eliminating PVC and hazardous flame retardants. The top-ranking cars this year were the Honda Civic, Toyota Prius, and Honda CR-Z. The Civic was free of bromine-based flame retardants in all interior components; used PVC-free interior fabrics and trim; and had low levels of heavy metals and other metal allergens. The makers whose scores improved most were Volkswagon, Mitsubishi, and Ford.

The worst rankings in the study went to the Mitsubishi Outlander Sport, Chrysler 200 SC, and Kia Soul. The Mitsubishi Outlander contained bromine and antimony-based flame retardants in the seating and center console; chromium-treated leather on several components; and over 400 parts per million lead in seating materials. Two carmakers' scores dropped this year, Daimler AG and Volvo.

To peruse the study results, go to www.healthystuff.org. Here you can search by

model, comparison shop between models, and cross reference with fuel economy standards, so you can be healthy *and* respect the planet. There's even a cell phone app. Also, as you shop for cars, pay attention to what you smell when you're inside them.

Or perhaps you'll keep or get an older car, one that's hopefully out-gassed most of that toxic “new car” smell — and is cheaper too.

Note: The website www.healthystuff.org also has toxic testing results for other brand name products.

SOURCES: www.ecocenter.org/press-release/2012/new-ecology-center-guide-toxic-chemicals-cars-helps-consumers-avoid-major-source- • “Think Before You Buy: 10 Most Toxic Cars,” By Ion Cortez, May 21, 2012 www.amog.com/health/153510-buy-10-toxic-cars

“The contamination of our world is not alone a matter of mass spraying. Indeed, for most of us this is of less importance than the **innumerable small-scale exposures to which we are subjected day by day**, year after year. Like the constant dripping of water that in turn wears away the hardest stone, this birth-to-death contact with dangerous chemicals may in the end prove disastrous.... **Lulled by the soft sell and the hidden persuader, the average citizen is seldom aware of the deadly materials with which he is surrounding himself; indeed he may not realize he is using them at all.**” ~ Rachel Carson

Toxics In Clothing, continued

This is even more important with vulnerable babies and children.

Note: “Organic” fiber just means that the crop was grown organically, which avoids agricultural toxics. Processing is what's done to make the garment itself. Especially look for products certified under the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), which defines environmental and social criteria along the entire supply chain, including for toxics. For more on these distinctions, see <http://life.gaiam.com/article/organic-clothing-can-you-read-between-lines-tag> and www.global-standard.org/the-standard.html.

■ **Avoid cheap new clothing.** Sorry, but the low price is usually only possible because of low worker safety and environmental standards, including the use of cheap toxics instead of safer options. We need to

get past the “cheap-and-toss” mentality with clothes, which produces all sorts of health and eco-harm. Instead, buy fewer clothes of higher quality that last longer. If you want volume, buy quality *used* clothes!

■ **Wash all new clothing before use.** And know that this might not be enough; some toxics are persistent and designed to stay in the fabric. (Also be sure to use less-toxic laundry soaps!)

■ **If you or others have intermittent health symptoms like those described here, watch if they happen when wearing certain new clothing.** Even doctors might not think to ask about this!

SOURCE: “When Wrinkle-Free Clothing Also Means Formaldehyde Fumes,” By Tara Siegel Bernard, New York Times, Dec. 10, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/12/11/your-money/11wrinkle.html

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. **STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. **STEP's mission** is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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