



# THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

## Avoiding Shower Curtain Toxics

A reader (Dian) recently wrote to me asking for advice on buying a new shower curtain. My first thought was about the toxics that common PVC vinyl shower curtains contain and bring into our homes. For instance, a study commissioned by the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice found a wide range of toxics in PVC curtains, including seven materials that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) considers hazardous air pollutants. Their possible health effects include asthma, neurological harm, and liver cancer.

"PVC is just bad from cradle to cradle," says Martha Dina Arguello of the Physicians for Social Responsibility. "It's a mess when you create, it's a mess when you get rid of it, and it's off-gassing when you're using it."

Unfortunately, content labels aren't required on shower curtains. In fact, "The EPA does not regulate indoor air, period," says the EPA's Barbara Spark. "We have not been given that authority by the Congress."

### My shower curtain system

So I decided just to share with her (and you) what I've figured out for myself so far. I have two curtains:

**1) A pretty (machine washable) outer curtain.** I let this drape outside the tub. It's lasted for years, doesn't need to be waterproof, and coordinates with my towels and bathmat. There are many styles available, including ones from eco-materials.

**2) A liner curtain that's water-resistant (or waterproof).** Some

people just use a liner, but I like also having a pretty one that covers the outside edge of the tub.

What's key for me is that the liner *not* be one of those smelly PVC vinyl ones. Because of the limited labeling, I'm left to just smelling them to see if I think they're toxic.

The liner I currently use is the Hotel Fabric Shower Curtain Liner from Bed Bath & Beyond. It's 100% polyester, machine-washable, "water resistant," and comes in various colors. To me, it doesn't have a smell. Plus it's soft and the warm ivory one that I have is so pretty when the light shines through it. These last me quite a while, and are only \$13!

There are various other water-resistant options online. Most of the "eco" options are made with PEVA, a non-PVC vinyl that can be sponged off but not machine washed. There are also ones labeled "no PVC," plus hemp and cotton duck canvas options that say they don't need a liner. (Whenever I see that claim, I look for a full contents list or anything that might reveal a toxic treatment.)

I've personally hesitated in buying online because: I want to be able to smell it myself; I don't know if PVC is the only toxic they might contain; and I suspect I'd prefer the softness of my polyester one over PEVA vinyl. However, if you've found something that you like, please do let me know!

### Two more tips

■ **You can help avoid mold on shower curtains** by shaking them out after use, then airing out the bathroom (by opening a window or turning on a fan).



It's Our  
Birthday!!

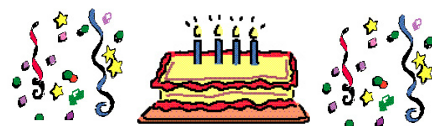
With this issue, we're celebrating 13 years of publishing *The Next STEP (TNS)*!

The goal of this innovative City project is to nurture a healthier Sebastopol for everyone by reducing our exposure to toxics.

**Thus we encourage voluntary reductions in the use of toxics in all areas of our lives** — including our homes, schools, businesses, parks, food, and environment.

TNS is produced by a small team of local citizens, working on a volunteer basis (which keeps costs very low) because we support this goal. We're grateful to the City Council and staff for acting in the community's best interest with this project.

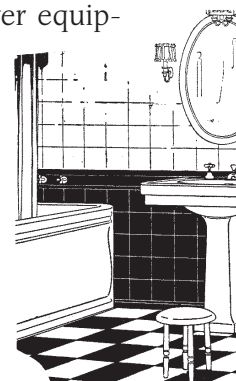
**Please fill out the enclosed survey card to give us your feedback about our efforts. Also let us know how we can best support your toxics reduction in the upcoming year,** including any questions, tips, story ideas, or success stories. Your support is what makes this project possible. Thank you!



■ **When I'm done with a shower curtain liner,** I put it in the garage to use as a drop cloth for painting projects. It's easy to cut, and can also line boxes or cover equipment. Be sure it's dry before folding it up.

### SOURCES:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jun/13/local/meshowercurtain13>  
• [www.chej.org/campaigns/pvc/resources/showercurtain-report](http://www.chej.org/campaigns/pvc/resources/showercurtain-report)



## Toxic Updates

■ **Safer sofas are now possible in California.** I've previously discussed how flammability standards for sofas, chairs, and child booster seats have been inadvertently pushing furniture manufacturers to use toxic flame-retardant chemicals. These materials are shown to be harmful to our health and ubiquitous in all of our bodies. Worse, they don't really help avoid fires — and can seriously harm the health of firefighters when they do burn.

So it's been great to see California lead the way by offering manufacturers a new flammability test that can be met without using toxic chemicals. The approach they're using has actually been shown to be more effective in preventing fires. Happily, these new flammability standards were just signed into law.

So that means that, if you're looking for a sofa or chair and want a less-toxic one, you can look for a tag that says "TB 117-2013" (not the older "TB 117"). Then ask the furniture seller whether the item has been treated with flame-retardant chemicals. The new law gives them the option to avoid these materials, but doesn't require it.

*SOURCE: "Toxic flame retardants may be on way out," by Michael Hawthorne and Sam Roe, Chicago Tribune, www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-flame-retardants-california-met-20131122,0,1794887.story*

■ **The FDA finally questions toxic triclosan.** In 2011 (TNS XI/6), I talked about triclosan, the chemical being added to everything from soap to toys to cutting boards with the promise that it will help protect users from bacteria. Unfortunately, for decades, critics have said that triclosan is actually no more effective than plain soap and water — and is compromising the health of both people and the environment.

So it was a relief to see the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) finally fulfill its obligation to take action on this issue. This December, it proposed a rule that would require manufacturers to prove that their antibac-

terial soaps and body washes are safe and more effective than just soap and water. If they can't, they'll have to be relabeled, reformulated, or removed from the market. The FDA will take comments on this proposal until mid-June.

The government only did this after three years of legal action by the Natural Resources Defense Council. Plus, the FDA's rule would only apply to personal hygiene products. However, it has implications for a wide range of antimicrobial products in an industry with annual sales of \$1 billion, according to EPA estimates.

Dr. Janet Woodcock, director of the FDA's drug center, says, "Due to consumers' extensive exposure to the ingredients in antibacterial soaps, we believe there should be a clearly demonstrated benefit from using antibacterial soap to balance any potential risk."

Colleen Rogers, Ph.D., a lead microbiologist at the FDA, adds that there currently is no evidence that over-the-counter (OTC) antibacterial soap products are any more effective at preventing illness than washing with only soap and water. In March 2010, the European Union banned triclosan from all products that come into contact with food.

You can help protect yourself by learning more about triclosan, looking for it on labels, and deciding if it's something you want to use.

*SOURCES: "FDA seeks tougher rules on antibacterial soaps," by Matthew Perrone, Press Democrat, Dec. 16, 2013, www.pressdemocrat.com/article/20131216/wire/131219681 • "FDA Taking Closer Look at 'Antibacterial' Soap," www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm378393.htm*

■ **National toxics law reform is falling short.** I've talked for years about the growing consensus that our national toxics law (TSCA) is largely failing in its mission to protect us from dangerous substances. This allows a wide range of toxics to enter our lives without safety testing, labels, or our informed consent. So I was delighted to see an alliance of activists and politicians advancing TSCA reform in Congress.

However, we recently got the bad news that the proposed "Chemical

## Timely Tips

■ **The next Sebastopol Toxics Collection Day is on Tuesday March 25,** from 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, call (707) 795-2025 or (877) 747-1870 at least 24 hours before the event.

■ **If your New Year's Resolution is to improve your health or avoid toxics, we can help!** The TNS Online Index makes it easy for you to quickly discover what's toxic and the effective alternatives. For instance, look under these **bolded** words in the Index at [www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html).

- Healthier **housecleaning**
- Less-toxic approaches to **ants, snails, mold, and weeds**

Safety Improvement Act" now before Congress falls far short of what we need it to be, and would likely just make things worse. For example, instead of making it easier for the EPA to ban harmful substances, it'd make it more difficult. It'd also largely invalidate laws that states have passed to protect their citizens, and make it more difficult for victims to sue.

I think that we need a system where citizens can shop and protect their health without having to be toxic experts. Unfortunately, this proposal won't help us get there.

*SOURCE: "New 'Chemical Safety' Bill Would Put People At Greater Risk," by Tina Sigurdson, Stable Law Fellow at EWG, Sept. 12, 2013, www.ewg.org/enviroblog/2013/09/new-chemical-safety-bill-would-put-people-greater-risk*

## 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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