

# THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM



## Skipping the Foam

A reader recently suggested that I write an article about Styrofoam's hazards and disposal options. I appreciated this excellent story idea!

**So what is Styrofoam? It's the brand name for DuPont's extruded polystyrene foam (XPS) products**, which are used for insulation, crafts, and floral arrangements.

**But we commonly say Styrofoam to mean a wider range of lightweight foam products from various manufacturers** — including coffee cups, food containers, coolers, and packaging materials ("peanuts" and molded). These items are made from **a similar petroleum-based plastic foam, called expanded polystyrene (EPS)**.

**EPS foam is also used in other products**, for its light weight and thermal insulation. This includes bike helmets, surfboards, toys, car parts, appliances, rafts, and life jackets.

### So What's the Problem?

■ **Risk to human health.** Styrene is considered a likely **carcinogen** (cancer-causing) by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the International Agency for Research on Cancer. ([www.ntp.niehs.nih.gov/ntp/roc/content/profiles/styrene.pdf](http://www.ntp.niehs.nih.gov/ntp/roc/content/profiles/styrene.pdf))

**EPS foam can leach toxic styrene and benzene into food and beverages when heated.** Styrene and benzene are known neurotoxins and suspected carcinogens.



**Plus children are often more vulnerable to such toxics** because their bodies are still developing, they crawl on floors, and they often put random things in their mouths.

■ **Not generally recyclable.** Both kinds of polystyrene (PS) foam listed to the left are usually not accepted in curbside recycling programs.

■ **Not biodegradable.** This means that PS foam doesn't decay naturally and safely for living things.

■ **Common form of litter** — in our parks, streets, roads, storm drains, waterways, beaches, and oceans.

■ **Harms wildlife.** PS foam is easily moved by wind and water into our ecosystems. It breaks into small toxic long-lasting pieces that animals on land and in water can mistakenly eat as food, risking illness and death.

■ **Pollutes water and ecosystems.** PS foam can leach chemicals into the environment, harming water sources, animals, and ecosystems.

■ **Impacts people and ecosystems during manufacturing.** Over fifty chemical byproducts are released during polystyrene manufacturing, contaminating the air, water, and communities near these facilities.

### The Good News

■ **Many safer earth-friendly alternatives are readily available.** For food, reusable containers are ideal, including plates, cups, and utensils. Plus there are various compostable and recyclable options for commercial and home use.

**For packing**, one can use biodegradable packing peanuts made from

## Local Toxics Disposal

■ **The next Sebastopol Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Collection Event is Tues. January 3**, from 4 to 8pm. To make an appointment, at least 24 hours before the event, call 707/795-2025 or 877/747-1870. Or go to <https://bit.ly/3q4OB3S>. Or email [toxicsdisposal@cleanharbors.com](mailto:toxicsdisposal@cleanharbors.com).

■ **For more about local toxics disposal**, see [www.zerowastesonoma.gov](http://www.zerowastesonoma.gov) or call 707/565-3375.

corn or wheat; a foam substitute made from mushrooms; plastic air bags; and paper stuffing.

■ **Governments are restricting EPS use, mostly for food and beverages.** The towns, states, and countries passing such laws include Berkeley (1987), San Francisco (2017), the European Union, India, Taiwan, Zimbabwe, Fiji, and China.

■ **Sonoma County governments are banning nearly all EPS food use and encouraging alternatives.** In 2018, Zero Waste Sonoma County (our waste management agency) developed a model ordinance to ban EPS in disposable food containers, discourage single-use items that aren't compostable or recyclable, and encourage alternatives.

**Sebastopol was the first Sonoma County town to adopt such an ordinance in 2019.** It prohibits the sale or use of EPS disposable cups, burger boxes, and clamshell containers by coffee shops, grocery stores, restaurants, and more. It offers select exemptions, such as for meat trays. And it encourages using compostable or recyclable alternatives when commercially available.

**Since then, the County and all the other incorporated towns here have passed similar restrictions.**

Sonoma County Supervisor Susan Gorin commented that these actions will "maximize the operating life of our landfills, reduce the economic and environmental costs of waste management for businesses and residents, and **protect public health**,

See *Skipping the Foam*, over

*Skipping the Foam, continued*

**while being good stewards of our waterways and wildlife.”**

### Where EPS Remains

■ **These regulations don't cover all products or all places** where we might find EPS food containers.

■ **EPS is used in other products**, such as packaging, cheap coolers, etc. It's more of an issue when EPS items don't have a sealed covering.

### What You Can Do

■ **Skip the single-use EPS foam for food and beverages, and pre-packaged meats.** Ideally, bring your own reusable cups, bottles, cutlery, and leftovers containers. Some places even offer you a discount for bringing your own! If you're offered EPS foam, ask for an option.

■ **Never put hot food or drink into EPS**, and never microwave these (or any plastic) products.

■ **Avoid using EPS packaging when sending items from your home or business.** (Reuse is ok!)

■ **If you use EPS for packaging, work in a controlled area**, so it won't spread into other areas.

■ **Seek to avoid receiving EPS.** We can get it through consumer products (such as electronics), and shipments of food and medicine. Ask vendors to use alternatives, or seek options that don't require EPS use.

■ **If you can't reuse EPS items that you have, offer them to oth-**

**ers for reuse, to keep them out of the gray cart and the landfill.** Some local shipping centers accept EPS “peanuts” and wine shipping boxes. (See lists by going to [www.zerowastesonoma.gov](http://www.zerowastesonoma.gov) and searching for Styrofoam.) You can also offer items on NextDoor and Craigslist.

■ **Don't put EPS in your curbside blue bin. It goes in the gray can** (and then takes up **landfill** space and **leaches** for a very long time!)

■ **See out-of-county mail-in and drop-off options** (for 100% clean items) at [www.zerowastesonoma.gov/materials/styrofoam-formed](http://www.zerowastesonoma.gov/materials/styrofoam-formed)

■ **Thank our municipalities for helping protect us with these laws.** It makes it easier for us to choose better options. Encourage them in doing more. And thank the stores who offer healthier choices!

*SOURCES: [www.dupont.com/building/styrofoam-is-not-a-cup.html](http://www.dupont.com/building/styrofoam-is-not-a-cup.html) • [www.goinggreenservices.com/Articles.asp?ID=260](http://www.goinggreenservices.com/Articles.asp?ID=260) • <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Styrofoam> • <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polystyrene> • [www.cehn.org/our-work/eco-healthy-child-care/ehcc-faqs/faqs-styrofoam](http://www.cehn.org/our-work/eco-healthy-child-care/ehcc-faqs/faqs-styrofoam) • [www.zerowastesonoma.gov/reduce/commercial/model-ordinance](http://www.zerowastesonoma.gov/reduce/commercial/model-ordinance) • [www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us/Article/Sebastopol-Passes-New-Polystyrene-Ordinance/Polysty-Outreach-Info-1019-C](http://www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us/Article/Sebastopol-Passes-New-Polystyrene-Ordinance/Polysty-Outreach-Info-1019-C) • <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/sale-and-use-of-polystyrene-foam-products>*

## Concerns About Flea and Tick Collars

A 2021 *USA Today* article starts with the story of a woman who used her first flea and tick collar (Seresto) on her service dog. The next day, **the dog had a seizure and died!**

**Seresto is one of the most popular flea and tick collars** in the U.S. Over 34 million have been sold since its introduction in 2103. In 2019, its manufacturer reported over \$300 million in Seresto revenue.

**Unfortunately, though, it's been linked to hundreds of pet deaths**, tens of thousands of injured animals, and hundreds of harmed humans, according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) documents. And **these incidents are likely undercounted**, as people often don't make the connection or know where to report them.

**The Seresto collar works by releasing small amounts of two pesticides**, imidacloprid and flumethrin, over eight months. It's claimed to be safe for cats and dogs.

However Karen McCormack, a retired EPA employee, says that the collars have the most incidents of any pesticide pet product she's ever seen, and yet the EPA hasn't informed the public of the risks.

A current EPA spokesman says, “No pesticide is completely without harm.... Some pets, however, like some humans, are more sensitive than others and may experience adverse symptoms after treatment.”

**A 2022 Congressional investigation and report recommended that the collar be recalled. Canada has banned its sales.**

### What You Can Do

■ **Research any pet insect control product you use or are considering.** Other products can have issues. See [www.greenpaws.org](http://www.greenpaws.org).

■ **For a summary of healthier pet options**, go to the *STEP Index*, under **Pets**, and read issue **VI/1**.

■ A local woman with four outdoor dogs has had success with **Innovet Pet Products' BioPel** natural supplement. The company has other natural insect control products.

*SOURCES: [www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2021/03/02/seresto-dog-cat-collars-found-harm-pets-humans-epa-records-show/4574753001](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2021/03/02/seresto-dog-cat-collars-found-harm-pets-humans-epa-records-show/4574753001) • <https://oversight.house.gov/news/press-releases/oversight-subcommittee-report-reveals-epa-failed-to-protect-pets-owners-from> • [www.cbsnews.com/news/seresto-collar-deaths-symptoms-collar-should-be-recalled-fleas-ticks-report-says](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/seresto-collar-deaths-symptoms-collar-should-be-recalled-fleas-ticks-report-says)*

## 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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**Want to detox your holidays? Got a pest problem? Or a toxics question?**

**The STEP Online Index can help!** It's easy to look up your topic and find our well-researched, condensed, and useful information — to help you get up-to-speed and into action. It also makes it easy to share this information!

**[www.healthyworld.org/STEP](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEP)**