

Cleaning house: Reduce your exposure to toxins at home

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Person holding spray bottle on grass

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Written by
Susan Bloom | For the
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Here, Cohen discusses common environmental toxins, the health hazards they pose to adults and children and the simple changes you can make to protect yourself from these hidden dangers at home:

APP: When did you become passionate about the topic of household toxins and why?

Cohen: I'm a rheumatologist and integrative medicine specialist by background and always had a strong interest in diet and nutrition. Some years ago, my dog contracted autoimmune hepatitis and died.

Based on my research, there's evidence that it may have been linked to his chewing on rubber dog toys. This realization led to powerful feelings for me and made me wonder if there were environmental causes. Now that I have two little children, it's that much more important to me to be informed.

APP: What's the magnitude of the problem?

Cohen: In our everyday lives, we're inundated with chemicals. By the time we walk out the door in the morning, the average woman has used at least a dozen personal care products -- from shampoos, conditioners and perfumes to cosmetics, deodorants, hairsprays and gels -- and the average man has used at least eight. The skin is very porous and breathable and these items can get absorbed into the body.

At the same time, the government's oversight of chemicals over the past several decades has been minimal and only five chemicals have actually been federally banned, including asbestos in 1978 and bisphenol A (BPA) in 2012. Based on the number of chemical manufacturing plants here in New Jersey, we're one of the most toxic states in the U.S.

APP: How can the chemicals hidden in everyday products affect our health?

Cohen: Many of these chemicals are endocrine-disrupting in that they can affect all organs and hormones related to the endocrine system, including the thyroid, breasts, prostate and all of their functions.

Over time, we've seen changes in the reproductive system, as reflected by girls menstruating earlier and a 400 percent rise in testicular cancer worldwide among boys, as well as an increasing prevalence of obesity, all of which are endocrine issues. This "toxic soup" of chemicals in our environment has been found to cross the placenta and cause developmental issues in babies who have been exposed, predisposing them to diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, weight gain and some cancers. The medical community has traditionally subscribed to the theory that the greater the dose, the greater the harm, but even in small doses these chemicals have been found to cause huge changes in biology.

APP: What are some of the biggest concerns in the average home?

Cohen: The flame-retardant chemicals that coat furniture, couches, pillows, and carpet backing are toxic and some have been eliminated. People should seek out manufacturers who don't use them.

Get rid of plastic food storage containers, because plastic, both hard and soft, can leach into our food and beverages, especially at high temperatures, such as when food is heated in these containers or a drink is sitting in a hot car. Go with glass options instead - they're inexpensive.

Avoid shower curtains, handbags, and other products made with vinyl (plastic #3), as well as products containing BPA (plastic #7), which has been mandated out of baby bottles but which continues to line the interior of most canned goods (including canned baby food) to keep them from corroding, and consider a Smart Phone case made out of bamboo instead of rubber (see www.funpanda.com).

BPA also is contained in the thermal paper used in printed store receipts, and a study recently found that cashiers who handled large numbers of receipts on the job had high levels of BPA. Try to avoid handling receipts or go paperless if you can, especially if you're pregnant.

Avoid pans with non-stick coatings, especially if they're old or scratched, because they can leach into food, especially at high heat; opt for 18/18 stainless steel cookware instead.

Phthalates, which reside in many nail polishes, hair sprays and perfumes to keep them pliable so they won't crack, also are a concern.

APP: What overall message do you hope to promote?

Cohen: Being informed about environmental toxins is more about empowerment than fear and even small choices that we can make to protect ourselves and our families can be significant. I'm not that domestic and, like many, I'm just a busy working mom with a curiosity -- if I can do it, anyone can.

For more information on Dr. Aly Cohen or her upcoming book, contact her at (609) 662-5212 or visit www.themarhuman.com.

CENTRASTATE SEMINAR: From nonstick pans to your daily shampoo, learn how to avoid everyday environmental toxins at a program with Dr. Aly Cohen from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. Aug. 1 at the Star and Barry Tobias Ambulatory Campus at CentraState Medical Center, 901 W. Main St., Freehold Township. To register, call 732-308-0570.

WHAT TO DO

Dr. Aly Cohen suggests some simple things you can do to minimize your exposure to environmental toxins and get better informed:

* Ventilate. "Ensure good ventilation where you live and work to minimize the effects of cleaning products at home and in professional settings," Cohen said.

* Re-evaluate: "Think about the products you use...and what's the price of beauty?" Cohen recommends brands like Neutrogena and Kiss My Face, which already offer toxin-free options, and expects more commercial products will follow suit.

* What's in the water? "Water bottles are made of either #1 or #2 plastic and are meant to be used once and thrown away," Cohen said. "Water takes on the characteristics of the container it's in, especially at higher temperatures, so it's best to drink water out of containers that don't leach. In our house, we use a reverse osmotic water filter, which wasn't that expensive to install, and glass water bottles made by Lifefactory (www.lifefactory.com)."

* Get tested. To assess her own level of toxicity, Cohen recently had a test to measure the level of different chemicals in her blood and urine against a national average.

* Take action. The Environmental Working Group (www.ewg.org) provides environmental health research and advocates against harmful chemicals.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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