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Chemical trespassers

By ROBYN STUBBS, 24 HOURS

Our bodies are like massive sponges - every substance we eat, drink, breathe and wear inevitably makes its way into our systems, whether we know it or not.

It's called chemical trespass, and without access to information about what chemicals may be lurking in the products we consume, we are being violated, says Sean Griffen, researcher with the Labour Environmental Alliance Society.

LEAS, along with Burnaby-New Westminster MP Peter Julian, isn't satisfied with Canada's current labelling rules, which don't require companies to specify whether a product contains known toxicants.

"It's cut and dry. The consumers have a right to know. Poll after poll shows Canadians believe they should be able to go to a supermarket and know what's in the product they're about to buy," Julian says.

He, along with LEAS, would like to see clear labelling in Canada that shows a 'C' if the product contains a known carcinogen, an 'E' for endocrine disruptors, an 'H' for hormone disruptors and an 'R' for reproductive toxins, in order to protect the public's right to know about any chemicals that may end up inside their body.

Especially worrisome little trespassers are PBDEs, or polybrominated diphenyl ethers, commonly used as fire retardants on upholstery, mattresses, electronics and even clothing.

While the effects of PBDEs haven't been extensively studied in humans, animal research shows exposure to PBDEs can interfere with brain development and hormone levels, and may be linked to cancer.

PBDEs also have a similar chemical structure to PCBs, which were banned in North America in the 1970s due to health and environmental concerns. Both PCBs and PBDEs were made to be indestructible, and they are - both stick around in the environment and accumulate in animals and humans for decades, and have been showing up in alarming numbers in women's breast milk.

On July 1, the federal government added PBDEs to Schedule 1 of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA), which means they can now be subjected to new regulations, pollution prevention planning or be banned altogether.

However, the government's latest move isn't enough for Julian, who recently tabled M-38, a private members' bill calling for a complete ban on all PBDEs - now.

"Putting it on a list, flagging it, and then getting kudos for having acknowledged that it's a problem doesn't mean they're going to do anything about it, and it isn't good enough," he says.

And if Canada is looking for evidence that regulating PBDEs has a direct impact on reducing levels in the environment and humans, the government needs to look no further than Sweden, which banned PBDEs in the 1990s.

"Sweden is the light at the end of the tunnel, because it tells us that if we do take regulatory action to deal with PBDEs, it's beneficial. They've seen levels begin to decline, in women's breast milk, particularly," says Griffen.

"[PBDEs] are persistent, but if you're not adding to the load, they will begin to decline. They biodegrade over a much longer period of time, but they do break down."

YOU SHOULD KNOW

PBDEs AROUND THE WORLD

- CANADA

On July 1, the federal government added two PBDEs, the penta and octa mixtures, to the List of Toxic Substances under Canada's national pollution law in Schedule 1 of the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA).

- EUROPE

The European Union has taken a hard stance against PBDEs, and banned all penta and octa mixtures as of August 2004, and all deca mixtures for use in electronic products including TVs and computers as of July 1 this year. The EU is now considering a full ban on deca mixtures by 2008.

- THE UNITED STATES

Penta and octa compounds will be phased out in California and Hawaii by 2008. The state of Maine will do the same by the end of this year, followed by a ban on deca mixtures by 2008. PBDE restrictions are also being considered in Massachusetts, Michigan, New York and Washington.