

September 8, 2006

The detoxification challenge

Toxic time bomb

By ROBYN STUBBS, 24 HOURS

While politicians debate the future of environmental toxins in Canada, the average citizen can also send strong signals to industry about the use of toxicants - it's called consumer power.

"The evidence so far is that when industry is compelled to find an alternative, it's actually been cost-beneficial to them, and in many cases, they can make more money than with the previous product," says Sean Griffen, researcher with the Labour Environmental Alliance Society and author of the LEAS CancerSmart Consumer Guide.

Required reading for anyone concerned with the health and environmental effects of commonly used chemicals, the guide details which substances to avoid and why, and provides specific products to use as safer alternatives.

Serving as safe shopper's bible, the guide gives consumers what they want: "A simple, practical approach," says Griffen.

"There is a tendency for people to get overwhelmed, and think 'no matter what I do, it's going to cause cancer or create an environmental disaster,'" he said.

"People need to have some solutions that show you can make ethical decisions and they don't have to be totally disruptive to your life."

CARE PRODUCTS

Looking pretty isn't just time-consuming - it can be downright hazardous. The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics (www.safecosmetics.org) is leading the charge on removing toxic substances from beauty products with its Compact for Global Production of Safe Health and Beauty Products. Many companies have already signed the Compact and sworn off cancer-causing chemicals or substances that could cause birth defects or mutations.

Several major companies including Avon, Estee Lauder, L'Oreal, Revlon and Proctor and Gamble have not yet committed to the Compact. Look out for:

- Benzyl violet - a possible carcinogen used in nail treatments.
- Formaldehyde - a carcinogen used as preservative and often found in nail hardeners.
- Cocamide diethanolamine - used in shampoos, lotions, and creams. Associated with liver tumours in mice.
- Coal tar derivatives - a carcinogen in permanent hair dyes. Some derivatives are linked with bladder cancer



and Non-Hodgkins lymphoma.

- Parabens - endocrine disrupters used in cosmetic products and sunscreens.

FOOD

A proper diet plays a role in preventing cancer, but organic may be a better way to go to avoid ingesting cancer-causing chemicals. Even though PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) have been banned in Canada, they are persistent pollutants that are still present in fish - go for the wild stuff over the farmed. And, due to pesticide residue on produce, here's a list of some of the most and least contaminated fruits and veggies if you don't choose organic:

- Most contaminated: apples, oranges, celery, peaches, cherries, pears, grapes, potatoes, grapefruit, snow peas, lettuce, spinach, nectarines and strawberries.

- Least contaminated: artichoke, asparagus, avocado, beets, corn, cranberries, eggplant, endive, leeks, onions, papaya, parsnip, pineapple, squash and zucchini.

CLEANING PRODUCTS

Using non-toxic cleaning products doesn't mean you're stuck with lemon juice and water concoctions. The following products don't contain any of the four toxic substances commonly found in cleaning products:

- All Ultra, Purex, Gain, Tide, Wisk Ultra Liquid and Bold laundry detergents, CLR Bathroom Kitchen Cleaner, CLR Calcium, Lime and Rust Remover, CLR Rust Remover, Dryel dry cleaner, Murphy's Oil Soap, Easy Off and Fantastic oven cleaners, Fantastic Spray Cleaner, Mr. Clean All-Purpose Cleaner, Pinesol Cleaner, Resolve Spot Carpet Stain Remover, Shout Laundry Stain Remover, Tilex Soap Scum Remover, Vim Cream Cleanser, Vim Oxygel Cleaner, VIP Detergent Bleach and Enzymes, VIP Soap Granules and Zout Laundry Stain Remover.

- Things to avoid: plug-in air fresheners, bleach, phosphates (found in some laundry detergents), and products with 2-butoxethanol, ethoxylated nonyl phenols (NPEs), silica or trisodium nitrilotriacetate (NTA).

PLASTICS

Plastic wrap is an easy fix for dinner leftovers, but there are some brands that are safer than other. Phthalates (which may cause liver and kidney problems) found in Saran Wrap have been found to leach out into food, especially when it's being heated in the microwave. Glad Cling Wrap, or any other wrap that uses polyethylene, is a safer alternative, but always avoid putting plastic wraps in the microwave.

Some research has also determined harmful chemicals (containing reproductive toxins) used in common plastic containers such as clear plastic and hard plastic water bottles can leach out into the liquid you're drinking. Avoid reusing clear plastic water bottles and buy bottles marked with a #2, #4 or #5 on the bottom, instead of the hard plastic polycarbonate containers, which are usually marked with a #7.

PESTICIDES AND HERBICIDES

Who doesn't want a dandelion-less lawn or a perfect blight-free rose bush? But instead of reaching for common pesticides and herbicides to achieve your garden goals, try out some non-toxic - yet effective - alternatives.

- Boiling water will control weeds on hard surfaces, or use Eco Clear Weed Control (acetic acid) or soap-based herbicides and weed oils.

- Get rid of dandelions the good old-fashioned way - dig them up with dandelion puller. Or, try Eco Clear Weed Control for dandelions and other lawn weeds.

- For a black spot on roses, mix one tablespoon of baking soda with two tablespoons of horticulture oil in four litres of water.

A complete CancerSmart Consumer Guide is available from LEAS for \$10 plus GST and postage, a small price to pay for improving your health and helping the environment. Visit www.leas.ca or call 604-669-1921 for more information.