

The Green Notebook

Watch What You Buy This Season: Toxins Abound

One thing to keep in mind as your purchase gifts for your loved ones is the toxins that can still be found in the products on store shelves, particularly children's toys. To help you give healthy presents, here is a round-up from Co-op America's "Heal Your Home" Center on the web:

Lead, PVC & Phthalates

Polyvinyl chloride plastic, known as PVC or vinyl and identifiable by a #3 or "V" symbol, is so toxic for people and the planet at every point in its lifecycle that some activists call it the "poison plastic." Of particular concern for children's health are vinyl toys such as teething rings, "rubber duckies," beach balls, and bath books. These are often made of a flexible vinyl that has been softened using "plasticizer" chemicals called phthalates.

Studies have identified phthalates as a hormone disrupter. Phthalates may also cause liver and kidney lesions, a higher risk of certain cancers, and may exacerbate asthma and allergies in children.

Avoid PVC-made toys and go for alternatives like wood, natural fabric, or plastics #1,2,4, and 5.

Lead, which goes without saying is highly toxic, has also been found in some children's vinyl products, such as bibs. Also, avoid any toys with possible flaking paint, especially fake pearls and cheap toy jewelry. Try to buy U.S. made when you can.

Clear Plastics and Bisphenol A

Bisphenol-A (#7) is legally used to make transparent, hard, unbreakable plastic products, such as baby bottles and "sippy" cups, and CD jewel cases. Exposure may cause prostate cancer, breast cancer, female infertility, and obesity. The Natural Resources Defense Council advises parents to avoid polycarbonate (#7) plastic. When in doubt about items you already own, call the manufacturer and ask. If you notice that a clear plastic bottle or cup has become worn, or that the clear plastic of a toy has become cloudy, that may be evidence of off-gassing bisphenol-A. Throw it out. Instead, choose baby bottles and spill-proof cups made of glass or polyethylene (#1, #2, #4 recycling symbols) or polypropylene (#5).

Unfortunately, it is up to us, as parents, to be aware of the recalls. To review toy recalls, visit www.recalls.gov or call the Consumer Product Safety Commission hotline, 800/638-2772. You can also find out more about safe toys for kids at www.healthytoys.org and www.uspirg.org/issues/toy-safety.

Apparently new and tougher legislation will be enacted after the first of the year, but that doesn't do us much good right now, so buy smart.

Sources: "Beyond Lead: Toxins in Toys," by Tracy Fernandez Rysavy Dec. 2007 *Real Money* from Co-op America, and U.S. Public Interest Research Groups.

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