A Clear and Present Danger?

As packaging material, plastic is virtually indestructible. So what happens when the chemicals found in this versatile synthetic show up in human bodies?

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Bisphenol A (BPA) is an industrial chemical used to make a dizzying array of plastic consumer products, such as baby bottles, toys, dental sealants, eyeglass lenses, reusable water bottles, stretch film, electronics, CDs and DVDs, automobiles, medical equipment, food and beverage can linings and glass jar tops.

Like most packaging materials, BPA was originally created to help extend the shelf life of food. In addition to its usefulness as storage containers, plastic packaging discourages food deterioration and also protects processed foods during shipment.

Today, BPA is used in almost everything. As a result, people have inhaled the compound, eaten foods containing the chemical or had their skin exposed to it. What's more, a number of studies have suggested that exposure to the chemical is linked with negative health issues such as reproductive disorders in men and women, cardiovascular disease, breast cancer and metabolic disorders. BPA has also been said to boost obesity risk and negatively affect brain development in infants.

Studies have even found BPA in pregnant women's fluids and tissues. This led researchers to believe that BPA can make its way into the tissues of unborn babies—and the same goes for phthalate, a chemical that gives plastic its soft, flexible feel.

In one study, scientists found levels of BPA and phthalates in African-American and Dominican mothers and their children, ages 3, 5 and 7, in two New York City neighborhoods. The levels of BPA in black moms and their kids were higher, however, than those found in Dominican mothers and their children.

But, when the Food and Drug Admin-istration did BPA testing on animals, the results suggested that pregnant mothers deactivated BPA and that their bodies released it before the compound had a chance to reach unborn infants. Still, these findings haven't applied to human babies. That's why environmental advocacy groups urge everyone, especially pregnant women and children, to limit their exposure to BPA.

The way to tell if plastic contains BPA is easy. Just look on the bottom of a container to see the number that appears in a triangle stamped into the bottle. The number is a recycling symbol called an SPI Resin Identification Code. The number 7 means the container may include BPA.

The FDA says the amount of BPA found in plastics isn't a reason for alarm. But many people aren't convinced. To avoid BPA follow these tips: Use BPA-free products, eat less canned foods, don't heat meals in plastic or put plastic items in the dishwasher. Instead, eat foods from glass, porcelain or stainless steel containers and also use these for storage.
