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LIVING IN A TOXIC SOUP

And some recipes for change

By Gillian Deacon

Some of my favourite moments in the day are starting to scare the hell out of me.

The smell of my husband's cologne lingering after he's dressed and gone to work (fragrance: petroleum-based chemical that can affect the central nervous system, trigger asthma and can cause cancer). The sound of my three year-old, giggling mischievously as he jumps wildly up and down on the chesterfield, happy and adorable (polybrominated diphenyl ethers [PBDEs]: a class of chemicals used as flame-retardants in mattresses and furniture, known to cause cancer and suspected of disrupting hormones). The taste of my morning poached egg, fresh from the pan (perfluorinated chemicals [PFCs]: used in non-stick cookware; extremely persistent and bio-accumulative, probably cancer-causing, toxic to reproduction and development).

And if the air, furniture and cookware aren't killing my kids, their plastic finger-puppets, superhero pajamas, even the tinned chick peas I'm so pleased to see them eat just might.

If that sounds like fear-mongering, consider this: there are over 23,000 chemicals registered for use in the Canadian market, and about 300 new chemicals are added to that list every year. And in this country, industry is not

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required to prove that a chemical is safe before it makes its way into consumer products. How about that?

If an automotive company manufactures a car that turns out to be mechanically unsafe, the company can be charged by Transport Canada and faced with enormous fines if it fails to recall that model. But if the upholstery in a car is off-gassing toxic chemicals over the vehicle's lifespan... sorry. Try opening the windows.

For its disturbing 2006 report, *Polluted Children, Toxic Nation*, Environmental Defence, a Canadian watchdog organization, took blood and urine samples from members of five Canadian families, testing for the presence of toxic chemicals. Forty-six of the 68 chemicals they checked for were found in both adults and children.

The reach of this chemical presence is staggering. PCBs, banned in Canada since before the test children were born, were present in their bloodwork. And beyond the survey, it's been documented that polar bears in the Arctic show levels of PCBs and PBDEs in their tissue. Surely they're not using non-stick cookware on their ice floes.

What can we do, living in a toxic soup with no chef and no recipe? Remove as many of the chemical-laden items from your life as possible (visit www.lesstoxicguide.ca for more information). Tell everyone you know how serious this is. Join the Toxic Nation campaign to strengthen legislation to protect all Canadians from toxic chemicals (www.ToxicNation.ca).

Because not only is there no legislation to oversee the manufacturing and use of chemicals in this country, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (CEPA) is described by Environmental Defence as "weak and ineffective." The Act is currently undergoing its mandatory

five-year review, so now — right now — is the time to speak up for change.

It was 1962 when Rachel Carson's ground-breaking book, *Silent Spring*, sounded the alarm about DDT and other hazardous chemicals in our midst. Almost 45 years later, it's easy to wonder if anyone was listening.

But in the hope that her cautionary wisdom can still be a galvanizing force for change, I leave the last word to her. "We should no longer accept the counsel of those who tell us that we must fill our world with poisonous chemicals; we should look about and see what other course is open to us."



SMALL STEPS

This summer, Federal Environment Minister Rona Ambrose accepted Environmental Defence's challenge to be tested for toxic chemicals. The Minister's blood is being screened for a similar set of chemicals as the children and parents who participated in Environmental Defence's study on pollution in Canadian families.

As well as Ambrose, federal Minister of Health Tony Clement, federal NDP Leader Jack Layton and federal Liberal Environment Critic John Godfrey also gave blood for testing. As of late July, Bloc Québécois Leader Gilles Duceppe had not responded to Environmental Defence's invitation.

The results will be released in this fall, so stay tuned to find out just how much pollution is in our politicians — and what they are going to do about it.