

PVC – The Poison Plastic

Do you have poison plastics in your home? Most of us do: in the teething ring dangling from baby's mouth, in Fido's chew toy, in the plastic wrap storing food in the 'fridge, even our shower curtain may be hiding a dirty secret.

Polyvinyl chloride, also known as PVC or vinyl, has become one of the most widely used plastics in everyday products and packaging. PVC is found in our food packaging, toys, flooring, water pipes, medical equipment, electrical cables, building materials and much more. For a full list of products that typically contain PVC, see www.besafenet.com/pvc/pvcproducts.htm. You can identify these plastics by the number 3 that appears inside the chasing arrows recycling symbol, often accompanied by the letters PVC or just V. Despite its widespread use, PVC is commonly considered the most damaging of all plastics—to our health, our environment, and throughout every stage of its production, use and disposal. The good news is, it's also avoidable.

Toxic to Make, Toxic to Use, Toxic to Recycle or Toss

The primary chemicals used to make PVC are extremely hazardous, according to an alarming report by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice, available at www.chej.org. Vinyl chloride is a known human carcinogen and ethylene dichloride is a suspected carcinogen. Throughout manufacturing, toxic byproducts are emitted into the air, water and land, presenting acute and chronic health conditions for nearby inhabitants and threatening local ecosystems.

During use, these plasticizers are prone to leaching, meaning they do not stay bound to the toy or other soft-plastic products. When your child or pet chews on a PVC toy, (s)he can be unintentionally ingesting these toxic chemicals. One likely-to-leach chemical, di (2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP), has been designated a probable carcinogen by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). But you don't have to be gnawing on PVC to pick up its toxic hitchhikers. There is also leaching from PVC food packaging, like plastic trays of boxed cookies or chocolate and plastic-wrapped foods like cheeses and meats. Inhalation is another common intake—that “new shower curtain smell” is carbon-containing chemicals off-gassing into the air. These volatile organic compounds (VOCs) can cause acute eye irritation, coughing, headaches, dizziness and nausea. According to the EPA, the long-term effects are liver, kidney, and central nervous system damage and even cancer.

PVC is not recyclable or even safe to toss in the trash. Unfortunately for recyclers like Eco-Cycle, a PVC bottle looks a lot like a #1 PET bottle, a very recyclable material. Any #3 plastic mistakenly entering the recycling stream can contaminate an entire load of #1 bottles. If landfilled, PVC poses a significant long-term environmental threat as its chemical additives can leach into groundwater. The incineration of PVC can form dioxins, often cited as the most toxic substance known to man.

You Can Purge the Poison PVC

Behind the ugly truth of PVC is a wealth of alternative products that will keep your family and our environment safer. First, avoid buying PVC by checking and rejecting those plastics carrying the #3 inside the chasing arrows symbol or the letters PVC or V. Also be on the lookout for those soft flexible plastic products with a distinct “new shower curtain” odor.

If you do find that your household products contain PVC, let the manufacturer know you want them to use one of the many safe alternatives for virtually every PVC product or packaging material out there. If there is no content information, call the manufacturer to ask.

Finally, join the movement against PVC plastics. The European Union banned several toxic plasticizers and the city of San Francisco has also banned these chemicals from children’s toys. While several major manufacturers and retailers are rejecting PVC packaging in favor of readily available, safer alternatives, two major retailers are lagging behind. Visit our website at www.ecocycle.org to tell Wal-Mart and Target to completely commit to phasing out all PVC products and packaging. Your voice can help create a safer living environment for all of us.

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