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Are Dangers Lurking in Baby Bottles?

Following numerous news reports on the dangers of Bisphenol A (BPA), the pregnant mother of a preschooler wondered if the chemicals in plastic baby bottles and sippy cups are safe for kids.

BPA is the major component of many common plastics, known as polycarbonates. These light, hard, unbreakable plastics are molded into ordinary household items, such as baby bottles, sippy cups, water bottles, food can liners, dental products, and kitchenware.

Since polycarbonate plastic is so much a part of our environment, most of us ingest extremely small amounts of BPA every day.

It is nearly impossible to steer clear of hard plastic. Reportedly small amounts of BPA can dissolve into our food supply when packaged in plastic polycarbonate containers. In high doses, BPA acts very much like estrogen, and has the potential to cause reproductive difficulties, birth defects, prostate cancer, breast cancer, and developmental problems.

Recent media attention, however, reflects no new information regarding the effects of BPA, as scientists have known of its possible dangers for almost 20 years. The National Institute of Health is just one governmental agency responsible for food safety in the United States. Recent NIH studies and national review panels have concluded that the tiny amount of BPA ingested, even with all the plastics in use today, is perfectly safe.

Scientists at home and abroad continue to study the effects of BPA on infants and young children. Since infants are more vulnerable to toxic substances than adults and because follow-up is more difficult with children, as the potentially toxic effects may not be apparent for 50 years or more, many question how researchers can accurately assess the risk presented by BPA. This is a significant question, as most of the world's non-breastfed infants feed from polycarbonate plastic bottles.

Concerned parents wishing to steer clear of BPA must become informed, and then make a conscious effort, as it is nearly impossible for anyone, not just infants, to avoid this chemical. Some communities have banned the sale of baby products containing BPA, and a few manufacturers are beginning to label products containing BPA. Concerned parents can also call manufacturers directly to ask whether their products contain this chemical.

Many environmental advocates encourage parents to switch to non-polycarbonate plastics, such as the softer polyethylene, polypropylene, or polyamide products. A number of non-BPA products are now on the market. However, there is no assurance that these plastics have a higher margin of safety than polycarbonates, since even fewer studies have been done on these products to determine whether they are safe. Because plastics break down with extreme heat and use, it is wise to avoid exposing plastic to excessive heat and microwave use, and to throw away any type of bottles that look worn or have lost their clarity.

On a personal note, with concerns for my own children and those of my patients, almost 20 years ago, I began to suggest that parents avoid using hard clear plastic baby bottles. Even though I knew there was NO solid scientific information upon which to make that recommendation, it seemed an easy way to avoid exposure to the potential risk.

Breastfeeding is by far the best feeding option for babies and their moms. Babies are provided with natural nutrients and are protected from infection. For others who choose to bottle feed, I strongly suggest glass bottles, as they have a long and safe history.

Let me emphasize that official scientific panels have said there is no scientific evidence to support the concern that chemicals in plastics cause damage to children or adults. A trip to the internet for information can be frightening, as the information available may be alarming and may or may not be true,

Parenting is difficult, the world's toughest job, and parents often have to make decisions when the information available is incomplete. Share concerns and questions with your pediatrician.

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