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What is Wrong With PVC?

Posted on April 1, 2013 by Rachel Tardif There have been 0 comments

What Is PVC?

Most of us are familiar with the environmental issues related to plastics: they are derived from petroleum, which means they contribute to the environmental problems caused by the oil industry, and they are not biodegradable, which means that once you throw them out they are going to be sticking around for hundreds or thousands of years. But not all plastics are the same, and PVC – polyvinyl chloride – is one of the worst. There are a number of toxic chemicals in PVC that make it dangerous both to the environment and to your health. Despite this, it's still a common plastic that is used to manufacture a wide variety of products, particularly in construction, where it is used for pipes, floors, insulation, and siding. It can also be found in common household products like toys, shower curtains, and packaging.



Toxic Chemicals in PVC

PVC is especially dangerous because it releases toxic chemicals throughout its lifecycle. In particular, the production of PVC releases dioxins, which are a group of chlorinated organic compounds. Dioxins are among the most toxic substances we know of – even at moderate levels they can interfere with organ systems and are carcinogenic. They are also very stable, meaning they do not break down in the environment. Instead, when they are released as a byproduct of PVC manufacturing, they make their way into the air and water and then up the food chain, which is how most people are exposed to them. Dioxins are also released when PVC is burned, which is one of the main reasons it is so important that you never burn plastics.

Other chemical additives are also used in the manufacturing of PVC, including phthalates, which are among the most common environmental pollutants. Phthalates are plasticizers, meaning they are added to plastic to make it flexible and durable. They are released during the manufacturing of PVC and can also leach from PVC products into water and food. Like dioxins, they are known to disrupt hormones and have been linked to problems with both male and female reproductive systems. Dangerous elements like lead and cadmium are also added to PVC to help keep it stable.

Disposal of PVC

As with all plastics, the disposal of PVC is difficult. It does not biodegrade, which means it takes up lots of space in landfills, and, even worse, many of the toxic chemicals in PVC leach into the air and groundwater around disposal sites. It also is not safe to burn, and its composition makes it difficult and expensive to recycle (in 2010, only 3% of post-consumer PVC was recycled). Another problem is that the process of recycling PVC releases many of the same toxic chemicals as the manufacturing process.

What Can You Do?

The best way to avoid PVC is simply not to buy it. Non-plastic options like metal and glass are safer and easier to dispose of responsibly. In addition, you can purchase PLA compostable plastic alternatives such as cups, containers and cutlery. You should be especially careful to avoid PVC products that will come in contact with food or beverages and any toys made from PVC. When you have to buy plastic products, try to buy recycled plastic and avoid PVC (it will be marked with plastic recycling code #3) and instead look for those marked #1 or #2, which are easier to recycle. Most city recycling programs will not accept PVC, but you should check with local centers or with construction companies to see if there are drop-off sites in your area.

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