



Which Soothers & Teethers Are Safe?

Tips for choosing chemical-free baby products.

by Paula Kehoe



Photos: Kerri Davis - Images by Kerri Photography

Babies love to chew or suck on things, especially when they are teething or fussing. But a new study is raising concern about toxic chemicals in plastic soothers and teething rings, and their potential impact on babies. Parents are questioning which products to buy and which to avoid.

The study, which appeared in *Environmental Science & Technology Journal*, raised red flags after researchers found that babies could be ingesting small doses of endocrine-disrupting compounds (EDCs), including bisphenol A (also known as BPA) from teething rings and soothers labeled “BPA-free” or “non-toxic.”

The problem with BPA

BPA is a hormone-disrupting chemical used to make plastics and is widely found in many everyday products in our homes. It has been linked to increased risk of obesity, asthma, infertility, cancer, early puberty in females, and type-2 diabetes. The research found that the chemical is still present in baby products labeled as safe and chemical-free, albeit at lower levels.

The study, which tested solid, gel-filled and water-filled teething rings and soothers, also showed some of these baby products released triclosan, an antimicrobial agent linked to liver cancer. Others contained parabens, a type of preservative linked to thyroid problems. The study did not release names or brands of the baby

products tested in this research.

In 2010, Statistics Canada disclosed that 91 percent of people tested positive for BPA in their urine, with the highest concentrations found in children. That same year, the Canadian government banned BPA from plastic baby bottles and asked infant food makers to remove it from baby formula packaging.

Since that historical move, store shelves have been lined with BPA-free products for children and adults alike. It seemed like a step in the right direction to make kids' products safe. Unfortunately, plastic teething products aren't subject to the same regulations, says Muhannad Malas, Toxics Program Manager with Environmental Defence.

"Why BPA continues to be allowed in teething products points to the larger problem of how toxic chemicals are managed under law, which does not necessarily require that a chemical found to be toxic is eliminated from all consumer products," says Malas.

Impact on babies

Just how toxic are these products? No one's really certain. Health Canada says it hasn't yet reviewed the study and declined to comment on the findings. South of the border, the American Chemistry Council is disputing the findings, saying, "the chemicals studied here are shown to be at extremely low exposure levels and well below government-set safe levels."

However, Malas says no amount of BPA exposure has been proven safe, particularly on fetuses, infants and children. What's more, the effects of their exposure to BPA is much more critical than adults. "Even with very low levels, these chemicals can have a major impact on a child's body because they are rapidly developing and weigh so little," which means their bodies are generally less capable of eliminating toxins.

Many manufacturers have stopped using BPA to harden plastics, replacing it with "BPA-free" alternatives, Bisphenol S and F (known as BPS and BPF). The bad news, says Malas, is that there is "growing evidence that these substitutes may have a similar impact on the human body as BPA."

Labels missing

Most parents know they should check ingredient labels for chemicals and buy only BPA-free products for their kids. But most soothers and teethers don't have ingredient labels. And if they do, "these chemicals are not listed," says Malas. What's even more worrisome, "the study shows many manufacturers make false claims, such as their products are BPA-free, when they are not," says Malas. "This is very misleading for consumers and parents who rely on labels to help them buy products they want for their child."

"Even reputable manufacturers could be using problematic chemicals, unless there is proof by a third-party or a non-profit group stating that soothers or teethers do not contain BPA," says Malas. He hopes stricter regulatory guidelines will be developed to protect babies from exposure to potentially toxic chemicals in teethers and soothers.

Until that happens, parents can do online research to find out which products contain no bisphenols (BPA, BPS or BPF). Malas recommends the Environmental Working Group's website (www.ewg.org), which provides current news and information about certain products containing BPA.

Or parents can simply "avoid plastic altogether even if it claims to be BPA-free," says Malas

Choosing safe products

There are lots of safe alternatives out there, including teethers and soothers made from natural rubber, unfinished wood and organic cotton. These materials are untreated, free of chemicals and dyes, and grown without the use of toxic and persistent pesticides and fertilizers.

Even though silicone may be cited as a safer option than plastic, Malas says "some silicone chemicals have also been shown to be linked to health risks" so it's best to avoid products containing it.

Until stricter legislation and better corporate responsibility lead to confirmed product safety, parents should remain cautious when choosing teethers and soothers for their babies.

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Other Sources of BPA

There is a growing body of evidence showing that long-term exposure to a number of chemicals commonly found in our household environment may adversely impact child development.

"Very young children and even babies in the womb are exposed to a lot of different disrupting chemicals from the environment and from consumer products," says Muhannad Malas, Toxics Program Manager with Environmental Defence. These include metal food cans, detergents, cleaners, food, toys, and cosmetics.

Exposure is particularly risky for young children given that they "spend a lot of time on the floor being exposed to dust carrying chemicals like flame retardants and phthalates, or chewing things that may contain BPA or triclosan."

To be on the safe side Malas recommends using Environmental Defence's, BPA and Food Pocket Guide and Toxic Ten Pocket Guide when shopping for household items. www.environmentaldefence.ca