

Maker acknowledges BPA worries

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Sunoco, the gas and chemical maker that once staunchly defended bisphenol A, is now refusing to sell the chemical to companies for use in food and water containers for children younger than 3, saying it can't be certain of the compound's safety.

Sunoco plans to require its customers to guarantee that the chemical will not be used in children's food products.

"We will no longer sell BPA to customers who cannot make this promise," Thomas Golembeski, head of public relations for Sunoco, writes in a letter to two investors Thursday.

This is the first time a chemical maker has acknowledged concerns about the chemical's safety. Environmental advocates and liability experts hailed the move as a major concession.

"This is fantastic news; it's a sea change," said Sonya Lunder, senior analyst with Environmental Working Group, a health watchdog organization that has been working for years to underscore the dangers of BPA. "It not only speaks to the ethical and public relations concerns, but to the scientific concerns as well."

Lunder said she was not certain that BPA was safe for anyone, but "this is a welcome development."

BPA is used in thousands of household products, including baby bottles, eyeglasses and CDs. It has been detected in nearly all Americans tested. Developed as an estrogen replacement, it is widely used to line metal cans.

The American Chemistry Council, which represents many of the nation's BPA makers, has maintained that the chemical is safe for use by all people, despite hundreds of studies that have found harm to lab animals.

The trade group issued a statement Thursday upholding that view.

"The ACC and its member companies that manufacture and use BPA are committed to providing products that protect public health and safety, especially when it comes to our children," spokeswoman Tiffany Harrington said. The group will continue to study the chemical's effects so "the public can have confidence in the safety of these products," she said.

A congressional investigation found that Sunoco and other BPA makers had hired an influential lobbying group 10 years ago to defend the chemical's safety.

More to follow?

Tom Bender, a Kansas City lawyer who serves as co-lead counsel on a class-action lawsuit against makers of baby bottles and infant formula, said Sunoco's move was "an acknowledgement of the dangers of these products."

Other BPA manufacturers would look reckless if they allowed the chemical to be used in children's products, he said.

For that reason, Bender said he expected other BPA makers to follow Sunoco's lead. "Let's hope they do it before there is any more damage to kids," he said.

Last week, six major baby bottle manufacturers, including Gerber and Playtex, agreed to stop using BPA in their products. That move came after attorneys general from three states asked for the ban.

Canada declared BPA a toxin last year and moved to ban its use in baby bottles. Within days, retailers began pulling their products from store shelves. Manufacturers and retailers including Nalgene, Wal-Mart, CVS Pharmacies and Toys "R" Us promised to stop making and selling children's products with BPA.

But the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has maintained that the chemical is safe for use. The agency's announcement last summer drew sharp criticism from scientists who have studied the chemical's effects.

To stave off further criticism, the FDA appointed a subcommittee to review its work. That panel found the FDA had erred in its assessment by basing its claims on two studies - both paid for by chemical makers - that found no harm. The panel found the FDA had ignored dozens of legitimate studies that found harm.

The Journal Sentinel reported that large sections of the FDA's report were written by the plastics industry and others with a financial stake in BPA.

Toxic levels

Tests conducted for the Journal Sentinel last year found toxic levels of the chemical in all 10 packaged products, including those marked as "microwave safe."

The amounts detected were at levels that scientists have found cause neurological and developmental damage in laboratory animals. The problems include genital defects, behavioral changes and abnormal development of mammary glands.

The changes to the mammary glands were identical to those observed in women at higher risk for breast cancer.

Several hundred studies have been published in the past few years on BPA's effects. Although studies paid for by chemical makers minimize concern for the chemical, most independent studies have found harm.

The Journal Sentinel reviewed 258 scientific studies of BPA and found that an overwhelming majority of the studies show the chemical is harmful - causing breast cancer, testicular cancer, diabetes, hyperactivity, obesity, low sperm counts, miscarriage and a host of other reproductive failures in laboratory animals.

More recent studies using human data have linked BPA to heart disease and diabetes. It has been found to interfere with the effects of chemotherapy in breast cancer patients.

Bills to ban BPA in children's products are expected to be reintroduced soon in the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate.

Suffolk County in New York state voted last week to ban sales of baby products containing BPA. Washington state is considering a ban.



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