

Another Chemical Ban For No Reason (the PFOA/Teflon Story)

By ACSH Staff — January 27, 2006

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and certain activist groups are patting each other on the back now that DuPont and some other companies have "voluntarily" signed onto an EPA program aimed at reducing environmental contamination by the chemical PFOA, used in the manufacture of Teflon and other consumer products.

These companies have agreed -- or soon will -- to reduce the level of PFOA in emissions and in their products by 95% within the next four years, and to zero (if possible) by 2015.

It has long been known that trace amounts of PFOA -- perfluorooctanoic acid, for the chemically curious -- are present in the environment and in our blood. How exactly it gets into our bodies is not known with certainty, but it may enter via drinking water with tiny amounts of PFOA from factories where it is used to make Teflon. Another possible route is the breakdown of related compounds found in many consumer products.

There are several scientific and health issues that have been ignored or avoided in this current plan to eliminate PFOA: first, there is no evidence that PFOA has any adverse effect on human health at levels to which we are typically exposed (see ACSH's [publication on PFOA and health](#) ^[1]). Even workers at plants where Teflon and other consumer products using PFOA are made have shown no increase in the incidence of any diseases, including cancer.

Also, there is essentially zero PFOA in Teflon, although you would never know that from the feverish news stories claiming that this "toxic chemical" is now going to be removed from Teflon. Rather, PFOA is used in the manufacturing process but is purged from the final product well before it hits the store shelves.

Worse still, a spokeswoman for the EPA (a Susan B. Hazen, acting assistant administrator) stated: "The science is still coming in, but the concern is there, so acting now to minimize future releases of PFOA is the right thing to do." Really? If this represents a new policy of the EPA, it appears that they have adopted the European model of assessing chemical risk, the Precautionary Principle, which in brief states that if we don't know for sure that a substance is completely safe, we had better ban it until further studies are done to show what level of hazard exists, if any. Any chemical about which there is "concern" -- i.e., *any* chemical -- should now be banned or restricted, if the EPA's Hazen is to be believed.

If this policy becomes commonplace, many safe and useful products will disappear from the shelves, while companies that make these products will merely pass on to consumers the cost of litigation against the companies by activists and the EPA. Also, when companies (like DuPont) pull such products and chemicals off the market because of activists' scare campaigns, it merely

encourages activists to attack other chemicals -- with similar results. Lawyers seeking deep pockets revel in these product bans or recalls, as they present an easy target: even the mere threat of litigation often yields big settlements. One story today about PFOA mentions a person born about twenty years ago with "birth defects" whose mother worked at a DuPont plant. He and his mother have initiated a lawsuit, alleging that the mother's exposure to PFOA caused her son's birth defects. While there is no science to support this, that may not matter once this theory (and the handicapped "victim") comes before a jury.

[An article in today's *Washington Post*](#) ^[2] asserted that this agreement to get rid of PFOA "is expected to have profound implications for public health and the environment." Nothing could be further from the truth: at typical exposure levels, PFOA causes no discernible harm to humans or the environment; its mere presence in our bodies does not mean that it's a health hazard (see our publication on [Biomonitoring](#) ^[3]). Thus, removing it can have no beneficial effect on public health. The dose makes the poison, and environmental doses of PFOA can't harm anyone, so what's the use of banning it?

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