

# More chemical hysteria: All smoke and no fire, thankfully

By ACSH Staff — May 18, 2011

A study published today in the journal [Environmental Science and Technology](#) [1] has been pounced on by breathless [media](#) [2] eager to help chemophobic activists fan the flames of hysteria about chemical flame retardants in baby products made with polyurethane foam.

A research team, led by Heather Stapleton of Duke University's Nicholas School of the Environment, found the flame-retardant chemical chlorinated Tris in 36 percent of the 100 products they tested, a finding that some ill-informed media "experts" deemed noteworthy because of the chemical's alleged ban from use in children's pajamas in 1977. The attackers have the wrong chemical, however: chlorinated Tris was never banned from any products. Rather, manufacturers chose to discontinue it when a different compound, brominated Tris, was banned by the Consumer Protection Safety Commission (CPSC) in 1977. As [we mentioned recently](#) [3], even the scientific basis for that ban has been called into question.

In addition to chlorinated Tris, the researchers found eight other flame retardant chemicals that concern them — though none of them makes quite the same splash as chlorinated Tris. Stapleton stated to CBS news that, when weighing the risks of chemical exposure against fire safety, she's more concerned about chemicals. ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross finds this absurd: "Fire departments around the country laud flame retardants and note how they save lives. And another so-called expert wonders aloud, 'Why do we need these chemicals in kids' products?' I'd say, 'To protect our children from fire and flame, as opposed to the ridiculous fear of chemicals with no demonstrated harm to humans of any age.'" He also questions the lack of specificity about the levels of these chemicals in infants, as well as the supposed risks — "whereas the benefits of such flame retardants are well known."

A statement issued by the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Society responds to the new research by emphasizing that their products meet standards set by the Consumer Product Safety Act, the Federal Hazardous Substances Act, and the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, all of which "contain flammability requirements [and] restrict the use of substances that are harmful or toxic."

It's worth remembering that, following the 1977 ban of brominated Tris, the CPSC reminded the public that "burn injuries to children wearing flame-resistant sleepwear are significantly less severe than those to children wearing non-flame-resistant sleepwear." Shaking her head at the recent spate of alarmist media coverage, ACSH's Cheryl Martin notes that "people's priorities — their assessment of risks and benefits — just seem to be getting more and more distorted. When will it stop?"

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**Links**

[1] <http://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/es2007462>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/18/business/18chemical.html>

[3] [http://www.acsh.org/factsfears/newsID.2607/news\\_detail.asp](http://www.acsh.org/factsfears/newsID.2607/news_detail.asp)