# In Shocking Development, Chemicals in Food and Packaging are Toxic to Children

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently issued a statement calling for more stringent food safety standards. Children are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of food additives, processed foods, and toxic food packaging. These harmful substances can have long-lasting health consequences for little ones. The chemicals of particular interest to the AAP are nitrates, bisphenols, phthalates, and perfluorinated compounds. In spite of a growing number of scientific studies, the FDA still lists these products as "generally regarded as safe" (GRAS). The AAP wants to change, or at least reexamine, that.

> *Regulation and oversight of many food additives is inadequate because of several key problems in the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. Current requirements for a "generally recognized as safe" (GRAS) designation are insufficient to ensure the safety of food additives and do not contain sufficient protections against conflict of interest. Additionally, the FDA does not have adequate authority to acquire data on chemicals on the market or reassess their safety for human health. These are critical weaknesses in the current regulatory system for food additives. Data about health effects of food additives on infants and children are limited or missing; however, in general, infants and children are more vulnerable to chemical exposures."*

# “Safe” Chemicals to Look Out For

The health problems with generally regarded as safe chemicals are fairly well known, although the way in which they affect children in the long-term is not definitively known. Nitrates/nitrite, phthalates, bisphenols (including bisphenol A (BPA), bisphenol AF (BPAF), bisphenol Z (BPZ), bisphenol S (BPS), bisphenol F (BPF), bisphenol AP (BPAP), and bisphenol B (BPB), and perfluorinated compounds (PFCs) are ever present in today’s food system, and they can be found both in and around the items we feed our children.

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- Nitrates, which turn into nitrites, are ions that naturally occur in a wide range of foods like celery, spinach, lettuce, onions, broccoli, and peas. They perform a useful function in the body, acting as a free radical, and an argument can successfully be made that nitrates are safe. However, they are able to function positively in vegetables because vitamin c and polyphenols in the plants keep carcinogenic n-nitroso compounds from forming. Nitrates used as preservatives processed animal-based products like hot dogs and lunch meats produce a very different effect on health, as they don’t have the same polyphenols and antioxidants and allow n-nitroso to form. Those compounds have been linked to cancer, mania (mental health issues), and can render hemoglobin unable to carry oxygen. This is an example of a substance that is beneficial in one context and a serious health risk in another. A proper vetting process from a regulatory agency would be able to notice the difference.
- PFCs come into contact with food through grease, oil, and stain resistant coating on food wrappers. They are also used in Teflon and can be found in non-stick

cookware. This is a large group of chemicals and some of the more recognizable compounds are perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), perchlorates, and perfluoroalkyl. Researchers have found connections between these chemicals and endocrine disruption, kidney and testicular cancer, liver toxicity, immune system damage, and most immediately relevant to children, reduced birth weights. It takes three years for any amount of PFCs that enter the body to reduce to half. There are children who have had a non-necessary chemical linked to numerous health conditions in their systems since they were born.

- Bisphenols are commonly used in cans, bottles, and receipts. Trace amounts of these chemicals are also found in drinking water throughout the U.S. These chemicals are endocrine disruptors and have been linked to hormonal issues; breast, prostate, and testicular cancers; and inflammatory bowel disease. The most famous of the bisphenols is bisphenol-A (BPA), which incidentally the FDA banned the use of in baby bottles in 2012. They did allow the GRAS designation to continue for the rest of the bisphenols, but a recent study has found that those chemicals cause hormonal issues like BPA does. Some of them (BFAP, BPB, and BPZ) are even better at mimicking estrogen in the body, the primary reason for bisphenols' endocrine disruption. The New York State Assembly recently proposed a bill expanding the ban on BPA in children's bottles to a ban on all bisphenols. No word yet from the FDA, though.
- Phthalates are added to plastics to make them more flexible and are found in water pipes, electronics, medical devices, food packaging, and a myriad of other places. There are many of them and no way to avoid them. Even the most scrupulous avoidance practices (glass packaging, organic, filtered water…) will be unable to completely filter them out and their GRAS status (which does not require their presence to be announced) ensures

> they can be anywhere. Some of the more prominent phthalates are fat-soluble, making foods containing high levels of fat like dairy and meat a likely culprit of exposure. Phthalates have been linked to endocrine disruption and breast cancer, as well as other conditions like asthma, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, autism, and neurodevelopmental disorders.

This is not new information. But we need to ask why this is the best our food system can do. The AAP is continuing that discussion, and the question remains. Why are these chemicals still "generally regarded as safe"?

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# How We Got Here

The GRAS designation was introduced in 1958. The list was meant to be used only for staples like salt and pepper, but an amendment to the law in 1997 gave companies the power to make their own decisions on which ingredients are generally regarded as safe. The rule also made the reporting process for these decisions entirely voluntary. That rule has not been significantly modified since 1997. Changes were published in 2016, but those didn't address what become a major health issue, companies allowed to market products they have decided are safe without any actual government oversight or independent scientific review. In the FDA's own words in 2016,

> *We also are amending our regulations to replace the voluntary GRAS affirmation petition process with a voluntary notification procedure under which any person may notify us of a conclusion that a substance is GRAS under the conditions of its intended use."*

If we are to believe the FDA, we've moved to a system where

the administration has even less oversight. No longer are companies required to ask for permission. Now they merely tell us it's safe based on the numbers and studies they themselves have produced. This is a system ripe for corruption.

It's also a system that hasn't significantly changed or made accommodations for how quickly food technology is changing. All of the above substances, nitrates, phthalates, PFCs, and bisphenol are still regarded as safe, in spite of multiple studies claiming otherwise. The FDA has a major conflict between what independent science has discovered, and the AAP is not the only organization to highlight that fact. Several prominent consumer and environmental groups, including Center for Food Safety, Breast Cancer Prevention Partners, Center for Science in the Public Interest, Environmental Defense Fund, and the Environmental Working Group, sued the administration in 2017 for failing to do its job.

Now we have a major medical group that serves one of the most vulnerable groups in the U.S., children, calling for change. Which is great, but the FDA has received this kind of admonishment before.

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# This Parent's Rant

How does it make you feel as a parent?

I feel demoralized. The amount of judgment involved in raising a child is overwhelming.

I'm angry. Sometimes it feels like even those who are trying to help aren't actually doing anything. The FDA isn't. According to Dr. Leonardo Trasande, the lead author of the statement and chief of the division of environmental pediatrics at New York University's School of Medicine,

> *The good news is there are safe and simple steps people can*

> *take right now to limit exposures, and they don't have to break the bank…"*

Why is that my job now? Of course, I want to ensure that my little ones are as healthy and free from dangerous chemicals as possible. But why is the health of my kids and your kids and the kids you never see in your neighborhood because they can't go anywhere without supervision less important than a company being able to label their products with toxic plastic hardeners the way they always have? Why am I the one to bear those costs? I know it's naive to assume it's that simple, but it doesn't make me any less angry.

As a mother, I can't help seeing how quickly we are condemned for stepping even a little out of line. Telling your child they can't have ice cream in the grocery store results in people who have no knowledge of your food needs telling you to let the kid have a treat. Allowing children to run and play in public spaces, even parks, produces contempt from complete strangers. Let's not even touch on how quickly parents who dare to question vaccinations are shamed.

Why doesn't that exist for the companies that systematically undermine our health and food systems when they know how much damage they're causing? It's money, and there's no way I can compete. I'm demoralized, and sometimes it's too much.

Our priorities as a country are incredibly disappointing and more damaging than we can fully appreciate. Lately, I find myself wondering what would happen if the companies that knowingly deny how toxic their chemicals are and prevent further study to maximize profits were punished as swiftly as a woman leaving her 8-year-old child in the car to get coffee.

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# Does It Have to Be This Way?

The AAP is correct to call out the FDA for the GRAS designations. The FDA is meant to regulate food safety. Yet companies have the ability to put products are on the shelf with ingredients that have received no impartial or independent scrutiny. At some point, every consumer has to put their trust in someone to produce food for them. The FDA has lost that trust.

These chemicals fundamentally alter the quality of life that is available to our children. The body is always detoxing, but how can that be effective when these chemicals are constantly being replenished? The health challenges to overcome for our next generation continue to accumulate. This needs to be addressed sooner, rather than later.

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