

Why eating macaroni and cheese can be bad

Chemical Phthalates Detected In Food; Can Cause Genital Birth Defects, Learning Problems In Children

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Potentially harmful chemicals that were banned from children's teething rings and rubber duck toys a decade ago may still be present in high concentrations in your child's favourite meal: macaroni and cheese mixes made with powdered cheese.

The chemicals, called phthalates, can disrupt male hormones like testosterone and have been linked to genital birth defects in infant boys and learning and behaviour problems in older children.

The chemicals migrate into food from packaging and equipment and may pose special risks to pregnant women and young children.

The Food and Drug Administration has not banned their presence in foods, though a 2014 report to the Consumer Product Safety Commission urged federal agencies to assess risks "with a view to supporting risk management steps." The report concluded that food, drugs and beverages, and not toys, were the primary source of exposure to phthalates.

Now a new study of 30 cheese products has detected phthalates in all but one of the samples tested, with the highest concentrations found in the highly processed cheese powder in boxed mac and cheese mixes. The report, which was conducted by an independent laboratory and paid for by



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environmental advocacy groups, has not been published in a peer-reviewed journal.

"The phthalate concentrations in powder from mac and cheese mixes were more than

four times higher than in block cheese and other natural cheeses like shredded cheese, string cheese and cottage cheese," said Mike Belliveau, executive director of the Environmental Health Strategy Center, one of four advocacy groups that funded the report.

The groups tested 10 different varieties of mac and cheese, including some that were labeled organic, and found high levels of phthalates in all of them.

Some two million boxes of mac and cheese, a relatively inexpensive food that can be whipped up in minutes, are sold every day in the United States, according to 2013 figures from Symphony/IRI Group. Belliveau said consumers

would have a hard time avoiding the chemical.

"Our belief is that it's in every mac 'n' cheese product — you can't shop your way out of the problem," said Belliveau, who is urging consumers to contact manufacturers and pressure them to investigate how phthalates are getting into their products and take steps to eliminate it.

Environmental and food safety groups petitioned the FDA last year to remove all phthalates from food, food packaging and food processing and manufacturing equipment, though the petition has been delayed temporarily for technical reasons, said Tom Neltner, chemicals policy director for the Environ-

mental Defense Fund, which is coordinating the petition process for 11 advocacy groups, including the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Natural Resources Defense Council, the Environmental Working Group and others.

Phthalates are not deliberately added to food. They are industrial chemicals used to soften plastics and are used as solvents, in adhesives and in ink on packaging. The chemicals migrate into food from food processing equipment like plastic tubing, conveyor belts and gaskets and other plastic materials used in the manufacturing process, and can also seep in from printed labels or plastic materials in the packaging. NYT NEWS SERVICE