Flame Retardants

Flame Retardants are chemicals added to a number of products to meet regulatory standards for a product’s ability to resist catching on fire. However, mounting evidence demonstrates that many of these chemicals are not effective at preventing fires. Furthermore, recent studies suggest that human health risks associated with flame retardants may outweigh their benefits.

HOW ARE WE EXPOSED TO FLAME RETARDANTS?

Flame retardant chemicals are released from everyday items that contain them and can then accumulate in house dust. Exposures are increased when foam is damaged or exposed. Flame retardant chemicals persist in the environment and accumulate in fatty tissues, which means they stay in the body for years. For these same reasons, animals may be exposed to flame retardants in the environment. Eating animal products can also be a source of exposure.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH RISKS OF I’M EXPOSED?

Animal studies of exposure during the early life period suggest adverse effects on the developing brain and reproductive systems. Human studies are limited, but emerging evidence suggests that children exposed to flame retardants in utero or through breast milk may have increased risk of cognitive and behavioral problems. Some flame retardants are also suspected to cause cancer.

WHERE ARE FLAME RETARDANTS FOUND?

Flame retardant chemicals are found in many everyday items, particularly those that contain polyurethane foam. Products commonly treated with flame retardants include:

- Upholstered Furniture
- Mattresses
- Carpet padding
- Baby products (e.g. car seats, changing pads, crib mattresses)
- Electronics

WHO IS MOST AT RISK FROM EXPOSURE?

- Children are at highest risk for exposure due to their proximity to the ground where dust settles and their hand-to-mouth behaviors. Infants in homes with a greater number of infant products (e.g. infant swings, nursery gliders, bouncer seats, changing pads etc.) have higher levels of some flame retardant chemicals in their bodies.
- Fetuses: Flame retardant chemicals have been shown to cross the placenta, and exposures during pregnancy are associated with hormonal, reproductive, cognitive, and behavioral changes in offspring in animal and human studies.
- Firefighters are at particular risk to exposures by inhalation as many building supplies and furnishings are treated with flame retardants which are released in the form of toxic smoke when they burn.
WHAT CAN I DO TO REDUCE EXPOSURE TO FLAME RETARDANT CHEMICALS?

- Reduce dust by wet dusting, wet mopping and vacuuming with a HEPA filter vacuum.
- Wash hands frequently, especially before eating.
- Ventilate indoor spaces.
- Choose fibers that are naturally flame resistant such as wool.
- Avoid polyurethane foam products, particularly those with the TB117 label.
- Ask manufacturers and retailers if their products are flame retardant-free. Ask for it in writing.
- Replace, repair, or cover furniture with exposed foam.
- Support legislation at the local, state, and federal level to eliminate the use of toxic flame retardants.
- If you purchase foam products produced after January 2015, look for the TB117-2013 label. These items no longer require flame retardant treatment of foam to fulfill regulatory standards (but use is now optional).