

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Detoxing Your Holidays

Dear EcoGirl: How can I avoid toxics this holiday season, especially when buying toys and other gifts? *Signed, Santa's Helper*

Dear Santa's Helper: Thanks for your question. Yes, reducing the everyday toxics throughout our lives is essential to protect both our health and the planet.

According to Dr. Philip Landrigan, Chair of Preventive Medicine at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, toxic exposures are a key reason for the rising rates of asthma, birth defects, neuro-developmental disorders, and other major diseases harming children in the U.S. and beyond. Other health problems linked to common chemicals include attention deficit disorder (ADD), breast and brain cancer, lowered sperm counts, early puberty, diabetes, and autism.

These diseases aren't just costing us emotionally. Landrigan estimates that chronic childhood diseases tied to toxic exposures are costing the U.S. \$55 billion a year.

"The environment is a powerful determinant of human health," he says, and children are especially vulnerable.

Keeping the Season Healthy

Thankfully, there are many ways you can reduce your toxic exposures over the holidays — and often even save money!

In prior columns I've offered specific ideas for: decorating with nature (instead of buying toxic store products); scenting naturally (to avoid the often-hidden toxics in commercial fragrances); giving less-toxic gifts (from wooden toys to educational books); serving organic food; and keeping your house clean and pest-free non-toxically.

For more information about these and other ideas for greening your holidays, see www.askecogirl.info.

You can also find information there about ordering my new Ask EcoGirl booklets, *Detoxing Your Life* and *Healthier Housecleaning*, for yourself or even as a stocking stuffer!

Buying Less-Toxic Toys

The Internet also has lots of information about how you can avoid toxic products, including toys. Plus it can help you find less-toxic alternatives. Here are two good places to start:

- **U.S. PIRG.** See www.uspirg.org/issues/toy-safety for PIRG's annual "Trouble In Toyland" toy safety survey. They also have a handy toy shopping guide and current regulatory information.

- **Healthystuff.org.** Look here for information about the toxics in a wide variety of consumer products. Their toys page is at www.healthystuff.org/departments/toys. You can even download their mobile application to look up products while you're at the store!

Reforming Regulation

Unfortunately, even with the healthier options available, many toxic items still remain on store shelves, most with inadequate labeling. This makes it impossible for us to protect ourselves solely through our consumer choices.

Therefore, we need to also act as citizens and insist that our government protect us from materials that compromise our health and ecosystems.

In September, good news emerged on this front when EPA administrator Lisa Jackson declared that overhauling the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) is one of her top priorities.

Most observers agree that TSCA, the 1976 law intended to regulate everyday chemicals, has been stunningly ineffective. Since TSCA was passed 33 years ago, the EPA has only required testing of about 200 chemicals, a drop in the bucket compared to the 80,000

chemicals currently being used in commerce.

Legislation to reform TSCA is expected to finally be introduced in Congress this fall. Jackson has outlined the principles she'd like reflected there, including: better standards to protect health and the environment; improved data from manufacturers; special consideration of vulnerable populations, especially children; encouragement of green chemistry's safer chemicals; fulfillment of the public's right to know; and EPA authority for timely action.

Helping Change Happen

Health and environmental advocates are excited by this rare opportunity to improve our toxic regulation system.

However, to overcome industry resistance to truly protective reforms, citizens must also speak out.

For more information, including easy ways to call for real change, see www.saferchemicals.org, www.healthystuff.org, www.ewg.org, and www.epa.gov/oppt.

By taking actions such as these, we can make this a safer holiday season for all, now and for many years to come!

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl: Encouraging the eco-hero in everyone."

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Published in the *Sonoma County Gazette*, November 2009.

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