

Everything you need to know about Phthalates

What is it?

Phthalates are a common industrial chemical used in PVC plastics, solvents, and synthetic fragrances. They've been around since the 1930's, and now they're pretty ubiquitous; when they tested 289 people in 2000, the CDC found phthalates in all of the subjects' blood at surprisingly high levels. They're often referred to as a plasticizer, which we think sounds rather like a kind of exercise to be done on the living-room floor in front of videos hosted by Jane Fonda. But we digress.

What are the possible health effects?

Phthalates are endocrine disruptors linked to problems of the reproductive system, including decreased sperm motility and concentration in men and genital abnormalities in baby boys. (Oh, and did you know that average sperm counts have decreased significantly since the 1940's?) More recently they've also been linked to asthma and allergies.

How can I minimize my exposure?

Avoid these, and you'll also be avoiding phthalates:

- ❖ **Nail polish:** Dibutyl phthalate is often used to make nail polish chip-resistant. Look for it on the ingredients list, where it may be shortened to DBP.
- ❖ **Plastics in the kitchen:** Take a critical eye to your cupboards. Phthalates may be more likely to leach out of plastic when it's heated, so avoid cooking or microwaving in plastic.
- ❖ **Vinyl toys:** Phthalates are what make vinyl (PVC) toys soft, so don't give them to children. Opt instead for wooden and other phthalate-free toys, especially during that age when they put everything in their mouths!
- ❖ **Paint:** Paints and other hobby products may contain phthalates as solvents, so be sure to use them in a well-ventilated space.
- ❖ **Fragrance:** Diethyl phthalate (DEP) is often used as part of the "fragrance" in some products. Since DEP won't be listed separately, you're better off choosing personal care products, detergents, and cleansers that don't have the word "fragrance" on the ingredients list.
- ❖ **Vinyl:** Vinyl shows up in a lot of different products; lawn furniture, garden hoses, building materials, and items of clothing (like some raincoats) are often sources. Aside from carefully choosing materials when you're making purchases, there is one easy change you can make: switch to a non-vinyl shower curtain. That "new shower curtain" smell (you know the one) is a result of chemical off-gassing, and it means your shower curtain is a source of phthalates in your home.
- ❖ **Air Fresheners:** Just like fragrances in personal care products, most air fresheners contain phthalates.