

Car seats draw new warning; Some found to have toxic chemicals

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Reports this year about car-seat safety might have parents' heads spinning. Now a report brings more bad news: Their car seats might be teeming with toxic chemicals.

A Michigan environmental group released a study this week indicating that chemicals such as chlorine, bromine and lead - which have been linked to cancer, as well as liver, thyroid and developmental problems in children and lab animals - could be leaching from seats, endangering the health of young children.

Some of the 62 car-seat models tested had no chemical problems. But 30% of the seats had high levels of the chemicals.

Those without any of the chemicals: Graco SnugRide Emerson and EvenFlo Discovery Churchill infant seats.

Those with the highest levels: Combi Centre EX Mango and Peg Perego Primo Viaggio Toffee infant seats; Britax Marathon Platinum convertible seats; and Graco's TurboBooster Emily and TurboBooster SafeSeat booster seats.

The researchers analyzed infant car seats, convertible car seats and booster seats.

Despite the report, parents should continue using car seats, the group said.

"Car seats save lives. It's absolutely essential that parents put their children in them while driving," Jeff Gearhart, Clean Car Campaign director for the Ecology Center, said in a statement. It's just that "some car seats are safer than others when it comes to chemical composition."

Claudette Juska, a co-author of the report and auto project coordinator for the center, said researchers selected the chemicals for the study because of their toxicity, persistence and tendency to build up in people and the environment.

Children can breathe and ingest the chemicals through gases, the air and dust from the breakdown of the chemicals.

"We take claims such as this very seriously," Graco officials said in a statement. "Safety is always a top priority, and nothing is more important than the well-being of the children who use our products."

Center officials looked for chemicals using a hand-held device known as an X-ray fluorescence spectrometer. They scanned several parts of each car seat, including the seat cushion, seat base, seat-belt clip, fabric trim and, in models that included one, the sun shade.

Although X-ray spectrometers are handy at picking up single elements such as bromine or chlorine, they are limited in the information they can provide about compounds containing these chemicals. Therefore, based on single elements, researchers deduced that compounds such as polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, and some type of brominated flame retardant were used.

According to Tim Osswald, a polymer engineer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, lead is used in the manufacture of some PVC products. Because PVC tends to break down in heat, degrading into hydrochloric acid, plastics manufacturers often add chemicals that will stabilize the product. Lead is a common stabilizer.

And although alternatives to lead exist, "they are more expensive," he said.

"So this issue is truly critical," Osswald said, especially when these stabilizers are used in products marketed for babies and small children.

Officials at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which regulates car-seat safety, had not read the report and would not comment.

Because these chemicals are more likely to degrade in direct sunlight and heat, the center recommended that parents keep their cars out of direct sunlight and keep windows open for ventilation.

It also suggested that parents regularly clean and dust the interior of their vehicles.