

Blogs – Hearst Media Group

Published online in CtPost.com; Stamford Advocate; Danbury News Times

Jonathan Kantrowitz

Political activist, health nut

Carcinogenic chemicals in children's furniture

Posted on January 7, 2014 | By [Jonathan Kantrowitz](#)

By *Susan Eastwood*

Coalition for a Safe and Healthy Connecticut

<http://safehealthyct.org/>

Back in the 1970's, carcinogenic chemicals called PBDEs were removed from children's pajamas. Why were they there? They were used as flame retardants, but were replaced with safer alternatives, or material such as cotton, which has flame retardant properties. Despite the fact that the toxic nature of these chemicals is well known, and that most of the family of PBDEs are already banned in the European Union, they have crept their way into many other products here, especially the polyurethane foam upholstered furniture and other foam products found in most U.S. homes today. These include pillows, couches, chairs, children's crib mattresses and nap mats, and many other items.

A recent study of children's furniture found that all but four of the 42 products tested contained flame retardants known to be toxic, including PBDEs. These chemicals leach out into our house dust and we inhale them when we sit or lie on foam cushions and pillows. Blood tests show high levels of PBDEs in both adults and children. Children are especially prone to high levels because they spend time on the floor where there is dust and many hours sleeping on treated mattresses and nap mats. Children's bodies are more vulnerable to lifelong effects because they are still developing.

Just as shocking is the exposure of the connection between the tobacco industry and the multi-billion dollar chemical industry built on flame retardants. Most fire-related deaths were associated with cigarettes but the tobacco industry lobbied to put high levels of flame retardants in furniture rather than make self-extinguishing cigarettes. They were successful in California. Sounds good, right? But in fact, testing shows that industry claims are false and that these flame retardants are ineffective in real world conditions. The California standard was taken up as an industry standard so that they wouldn't have to market two different levels of their product in different parts of the country, so most of us have these high levels of flame retardants in our furniture. Check your own furniture for tags that say it meets the CA flame retardant standard TB 117, the outdated standard that requires excessive amounts of flame retardant chemicals to be added to furniture foam.

New methods of fire prevention have dramatically lowered fire related deaths; these include smoke alarms, sprinklers, and self-extinguishing cigarettes. Tests show that the heavy amounts of chemicals added to foam furniture have little or no effect on slowing the spread of a fire. Instead, you can buy furniture and textiles made from natural fibers

like wool, jute or cotton – these materials are more naturally flame-resistant than synthetic fibers and require fewer chemical additives to meet flammability standards. Firefighters have been working with health advocates to change the CA regulation for years, citing rising rates of cancer in firefighters inhaling toxic chemicals burning in fires. The 20 percent rise in rates of childhood cancer has been linked to these and other chemicals used in children’s products. But the chemical industry spent great amounts of money fighting any changes.

Consumers began to learn about the mounting evidence against flame retardants and cried out for change, asking manufacturers for alternatives and calling their legislators. Recently, Governor Brown of California issued an order changing the regulations for his state, allowing the manufacturers to meet safety standards with safer alternatives.

The Coalition for a Safe and Healthy CT will be hosting a series of community events centered on parents and consumers “Right to Know” regarding substances in children’s products and common household items that are toxic to young children.

Locally, this event will take place at the Ferguson Library in Stamford on Tuesday January 14, 2014 at 11:30 AM.

By Susan Eastwood

Coalition for a Safe and Healthy Connecticut

<http://safehealthyct.org/>

<http://blog.ctnews.com/kantrowitz/2014/01/07/carcinogenic-chemicals-in-childrens-furniture/>