

What did
you **BUY** today...?



What we know,
what we do not
know, and what
we ought to
know about
chemicals
in everyday
household items



Friends of
the Earth
Europe

**FRIENDS OF
THE EARTH EUROPE
SAFER CHEMICALS
CAMPAIGN**

Synthetic chemicals are impossible to avoid. Most of us probably think of chemicals as toilet cleaner, paint and bleach but synthetic chemicals are in just about everything – CDs, clothing, drink bottles, printed materials, furniture, TVs, toys and cars for example.

Many of the ingredients in COSMETICS are labelled because there is such close skin contact with cosmetics. But "parfum" or "perfume" may be any of hundreds of ingredients.

CLEANING PRODUCTS and DIY MATERIALS are partially labelled, but many of the terms are generic (e.g. "anionic surfactants") so we do not know exactly what the chemicals are.

CLOTHING will show what material has been used (such as cotton or polyester) but dyes and other additives are not usually listed.

And most of the things we buy have NO LIST OF CHEMICALS at all.

**TIME for
a coherent
right
to know**



Why do we need to know?

- > Not all chemicals have been tested for safety even though they may be used in products we use every day.
- > Consumers who are sensitive to certain chemicals will be able to avoid them.
- > Campaigners will be able to investigate how green manufacturers are – or are not.

Consumers should have a choice – we pay for it.

- > Retailers will have more confidence in the safety of products on their shelves.
- > Manufacturers will be deterred from using toxic chemicals.
- > Some chemicals leave the articles, albeit in minute quantities, and get into our bodies, either through the air we breathe or we absorb them through the skin.
- > Some products contain substances which may cause cancer, damage genes or have long-term effects on reproduction.
- > Some chemicals persist in the environment for many years.



Child's play



Soft plastic toys used to be manufactured with substances called phthalates (pronounced "thallates") which soften the plastic and can make it squishy.

But for many years phthalates have been suspected to have subtle, long-term effects on the hormone system. Since babies and young children often put plastic toys into their mouths, a series of temporary bans on the use of phthalates in toys intended for mouthing was put in place in the EU. But other toys can still be manufactured using phthalates, and for years manufacturers tried to argue about what quantity of phthalates might be safe rather than taking the most precautionary approach and eliminating them from toys altogether.

We all buy chemicals without knowing how dangerous they may be.

With a label, parents could have made a choice for themselves and would probably have chosen to be on the safe side – toys without phthalates.

Safe as houses?



Retailers usually do not know what chemicals are in products, and neither do their immediate suppliers.

It's not just what is inside the kitchen cabinet – it is what the kitchen cabinet is made of. Many cabinets are made of MDF, medium density fibreboard. The glues in the wood often contain the solvent formaldehyde which can be released into the air. Formaldehyde is a suspected cancer-causing agent and may cause other problems.

And non-stick pans are known to give off dangerous fumes if over-heated. Birds are particularly vulnerable and can die in minutes if exposed to these gases.

Next time you buy a cupboard or non-stick pans, you can look for a label – but it won't tell you anything about hazardous chemicals

You cannot see everything on the telly

We could not find a list of all the chemicals and metals that go into a TV, although someone probably knows.

But we do know that they contain fire prevention chemicals, called flame retardants. These are very long-lived chemicals which are suspected to affect hormone systems and which could interfere with reproduction, and cause birth defects or cancers.

Flame retardants are used in many articles – including laptops, cars, sofas and mattresses – and are now being found in human tissue and household dust. Their use is being restricted increasingly as concerns about their safety grow.



Even where safer alternatives exist we cannot choose them unless we are given more information.

Some companies already provide the consumer with information about chemicals contained in their products. For example, the websites of Ecover and Lavera have lists of ingredients in specific retail products.

Other retailers – such as Marks & Spencer, IKEA, Sony, the Co-operative and H&M – are working hard to specify safer chemicals in the products they sell and are being transparent about their policies.

But we need a legally binding requirement to make sure we always know what chemicals are contained in the products we buy.

344 Members of the European Parliament voted for a right to know on chemicals in November 2005, but we still need to persuade others to ensure this becomes law.



DID YOU KNOW? The European Community has signed up to an international law (the Aarhus Convention) which requires development of product information to enable consumers to make informed environmental choices.

Here's what you can do



We need your help



**Friends of
the Earth
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Take action for safer chemicals!

Right now, new laws (known as REACH – Regulation, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) are being discussed to improve the regulation of chemicals. Ideally, consumer articles will not contain hazardous chemicals, but it may be a very long time before that becomes a reality.

Friends of the Earth is campaigning for the right to know about chemicals in all products that we use and buy so that we can make informed choices

You can help us press for change at:
www.chemicalreaction.org
www.foeeurope.org/safer_chemicals/Index.htm