

 Posted: 11/10/09 (Nov. 9) -- Opening a can of soup on a cold winter day is a time-honored tradition in America. It may also prove harmful to your health, according to a new study.

In the study released by Consumer Reports, canned soup, tuna, juice and green beans have all been found to contain potentially dangerous levels of bisphenol A, a man-made chemical preservative that increases shelf-life. Hundreds of scientific, peer-reviewed studies have suggested health risks from exposure to the chemical, known as BPA, including increased incidence of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, liver disorders, breast cancer and abnormal reproductive organ development, Consumer Reports said.

"Just one or a few servings of these products is enough to take you to a level of concern, in which the scientific literature shows similar levels causing problems in animals," says Urvashi Rangan, a senior scientist at Consumer Reports who was involved in analyzing the data.

The highest concentrations of BPA that Consumer Reports measured were in Campbell's and Progresso soup cans, and canned Del Monte green beans. The magazine even discovered BPA in the canned version of Similac Advance infant formula.

Anthony Sanzio, a spokesman for Campbell's, took issue with the notion that the BPA used to line the cans of his company's signature product is in any way unsafe. "Every leading regulatory agency in the world has concluded that BPA is safe," Sanzio said. "We use BPA to protect what's inside the can, and ensure safety."

According to Consumer Reports, however, a 165-pound adult who ate one serving of canned green beans would exceed by about 80 times what the magazine's experts considered an acceptable daily amount of BPA. Children who ate multiple daily servings of foods found to have high levels of BPA would approach levels found to have done harm in animals, the report said.

Current federal guidelines, which Consumer Reports believes are based on inaccurate science, limit exposure of BPA to 50 micrograms per kilogram of body weight. Sanzio notes that Campbell's is adhering to the law.

Stephen G. Hentges, spokesman for the American Chemistry Council, an industry group, does not deny the specific levels of BPA that Consumer Reports measured in the canned goods, but, like Sanzio, argues that the amounts are not harmful. "We have reached the same conclusion as government agencies all over the world," Hentges said. "Studies show that in low doses, BPA is safe."

Rangan counters that government standards were based on a handful of decades old studies. "Since then we have hundreds of newer studies that show that low dosage levels of BPA are harmful to animals," Rangan said.

Frederick vom Saal, a professor of biological sciences at the University of Missouri and one of the world's leading researchers on BPA, is hopeful that regulatory action will soon restrict the use of the chemical in canned goods. "The chemical industry is heading off a cliff on BPA," vom Saal said. "These are the same product protection people who worked with the cigarette industry."

First approved for use in 1963, BPA became widespread in the United States in the 1980s. This year, 8 billion pounds of BPA will be produced worldwide, up from 6 million pounds in 1970, vom Saal said.

He believes our growing use of BPA helps explain skyrocketing obesity rates, and cited research linking BPA and obesity in rats.

"In our studies with BPA, obesity in animals is not because they are eating more. Because of BPA, their metabolic systems do not work properly," vom Saal said. "Between 1992 and 1998, the CDC found a 50 percent increase in obesity in America. So what change happened in those six years? Being a couch potato doesn't explain it."

align="justify">Bills introduced in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate have proposed a ban on BPA, and this coming year the EPA and the FDA plan separate inquiries into whether to regulate the use of BPA in food packaging. Canada has banned BPA in baby bottles, and Walmart stores have voluntarily removed baby bottles with BPA from store shelves in the U.S.

align="justify">In light of what it views as the negative health effects of BPA, Consumer Reports made the following recommendations:

align="justify">In a written statement rebutting that advice, Hentges said, "The recommendations from Consumer Reports' unnamed experts are inconsistent with the conclusions of expert regulatory bodies worldwide, all of which have confirmed that BPA exposure levels are low, and well within safety standards."