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A federal health agency acknowledged for the first time yesterday concerns that a chemical found in thousands of everyday products such as baby bottles and compact discs may cause cancer and other serious disorders.

This Story

U.S. Cites Fears on Chemical In Plastics
How To Limit Your BPA Exposure
Bisphenol A

The draft report by the National Toxicology Program signaled a turning point in the government's position on bisphenol A, or BPA, a chemical so ubiquitous in the United States that it has been detected in the urine of 93 percent of the population over 6 years of age.

Last year, another expert panel using outside scientists minimized the health risks of BPA, but its findings were widely assailed after a congressional investigation found that a firm hired to perform scientific analysis was also working for the chemical industry.

Used in the production of plastic since the 1950s, BPA may be linked in laboratory animals to breast cancer, prostate cancer, early puberty in females and behavioral changes, according to the study released yesterday. It called for more research into the chemical's health effects.

Although the National Toxicology Program, an office of the National Institutes of Health, has no power to regulate BPA, its findings are used by other federal agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency, which set safe exposure limits for chemicals.

"What we've got is a warning, a signal, of some concerns," said Mike Shelby, director of the Center for the Evaluation of Risks to Human Reproduction, who oversaw the report. "We could not dismiss the possibility that similar or related effects might occur in humans."

Public health advocates said the report should spur the government to ban BPA, at least in baby products. Formula-fed infants are most vulnerable to the chemical, since it is found in baby bottles as well as in the linings of cans of powdered and liquid formula. "They get a double exposure," said Anila Jacob, a senior scientist at the nonprofit Environmental Working Group.

But Steven G. Hentges, executive director of the polycarbonate/BPA global group at the American Chemistry Council, said the new report does not mean BPA is unsafe.

"It found no serious or high-level concerns for human health," he said. "More research is always considered valuable."

The toxicology panel used a five-level rating system, ranging from serious concern to negligible concern. It labeled the possible cancer risk of BPA as "some concern," in the middle of the scale. There was not enough scientific evidence to rank it as a "concern" or a "serious concern," Shelby said.

Asked in an interview whether exposure to BPA can be eliminated, Shelby paused. "It's everywhere," he said. "It's not clear that we know what all the sources of BPA exposure are. The vast majority of exposure is through food and drink -- cans and bottles. But there could be trace amounts in water, dust. Your cellphone is probably made out of it."

Since BPA is most readily absorbed through food and drink containers, health advocates have been particularly focused on how the Food and Drug Administration is regulating the chemical. An FDA spokesman declined to comment on the new report, saying the agency has not had a chance to review it.

The FDA has been under fire from the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which has been investigating the influence of the chemical industry on the agency's regulation of BPA in plastic liners in metal cans of baby formula.

Last month, in response to questions from lawmakers, the FDA said it had disregarded hundreds of government and academic studies about the cancer risks of BPA and used just two studies funded by the chemical industry to determine that the chemical is safe.

Yesterday's report should spur the FDA to reconsider its decisions regarding BPA, said Reps. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.), the Energy and Commerce chairman, and Bart Stupak (D-Mich.), chairman of the panel's oversight and investigations subcommittee.

"These assessments fly in the face of the FDA's determination that BPA is safe," Dingell said through a spokesman. "I hope the FDA is willing to reconsider their position on BPA for the safety of our infants and children."

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said, referring to the National Toxicology Program: "It appears that NTP has really listened to the concerns of scientists in this field. This is an important public health issue, and we can't afford to get it wrong."

Concern about BPA has been growing for years, and the chemistry council's Web site has pages devoted to responding to "scare stories" about the chemical. "The weight of scientific evidence clearly supports the safety of BPA and provides strong reassurance that there is no basis for human health concerns from exposure to BPA," one page says.

A number of states, including California and New Jersey, are considering bans on BPA. Others, such as Maine, may require manufacturers to place warning labels on products containing it.

The worries have been a boon for a two-year-old company, Born Free, that manufactures BPA-free baby bottles and sippy cups. The company can't turn out bottles fast enough, and demand intensifies with new scientific studies.

"Every time there is a publication, after a few days, we're out of stock," said Gil Lemel, the company's chief executive. "Every time we think we are better prepared, it never is enough. We make 80,000 bottles a day, and we have no inventory."