



Antibacterial Soap: Few Clear Benefits, Many Murky Questions about Safety

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The chemical triclosan has been a popular ingredient in many household cleaning products despite the fact that its supposed antibacterial properties have not been proved. Making a questionable claim is one thing; promoting an ingredient that also might have harmful side effects is quite another.

Triclosan is found in so many products ranging from soap to toothpaste to cutting boards that a survey by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found traces of the chemical in the urine of 3 in 4 people older than five.

That's a pretty heavy concentration for a chemical that might pose hormonal problems, make bacteria more resistant to antibiotics and pose an environmental hazard. That's why both the FDA and the Environmental Protection Agency are studying its effects. In April 2010, the FDA announced that "in light of animal [studies raising questions about triclosan's safety](#), the agency is engaged in an ongoing scientific review to incorporate the most up-to-date data and information into the regulations that govern consumer products containing triclosan. ... For some consumer products, there is clear evidence that triclosan provides a benefit. For other consumer products, FDA has not received evidence that the triclosan provides an extra benefit to health. At

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this time, the agency does not have evidence that triclosan in antibacterial soaps and body washes provides any benefit over washing with regular soap and water.”

Manufacturers, as expected, disagree, and are lobbying hard to protect the \$750 million they earn every year in sales of antimicrobial and antibacterial hand soaps. Some consumer groups and congressional representatives want an outright ban of triclosan in antiseptic products such as hand soap.

Recently, the FDA announced it was extending its scrutiny of triclosan. As reported by the [New York Times](#), concern centers around studies showing that triclosan might alter hormone regulation in laboratory animals and/or promote resistance to antibiotics.

You have to wonder why, if soap manufacturers were truly sold on the safety of triclosan, a major player like Colgate-Palmolive would reformulate its Antibacterial Dish Liquid and Softsoap products, claiming that “changing consumer preferences” were responsible.

Dr. Douglas Throckmorton, the FDA’s deputy director for regulatory programs who was interviewed by The Times, said the ongoing review focused on hand soaps but could extend to other consumer products if the agency determined that triclosan raised health concerns. That apparently does not include Colgate Total, a toothpaste whose triclosan content helps fight gingivitis.

But soap? Because the FDA believes that traditional soap is just as effective as an antimicrobial variety, and because the possibility of hormonal disruption and the fostering of antibiotic-resistant bacteria are of much greater concern than whether your cleansing agent is trendy, you might think twice before washing up with triclosan.

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