

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info



Detoxing Your Cookware

Dear EcoGirl: In your article “Chemical Trespass & Body Burden,” you reported that PFCs (from nonstick pans) are frequently being found in our bodies. How can we avoid these chemicals? Those nonstick pans are so useful! Thanks for your efforts; they’re much appreciated. *Signed, Cooking Up a Storm*

Dear Cooking: Thanks for your sweet email. It’s always wonderful to hear that folks find my information useful! Also thanks for your great question. Certainly, I can offer you some input, although this is an arena where consumer products and information haven’t always caught up with our need to know.

Chemical Trespass

In the article you mention, I describe a study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that found that nearly everyone tested had toxic mercury, perchlorate, bisphenol A (BPA), acrylamide, perfluorinated chemicals (PFCs), and the flame retardant BDE-47 in their bodies. And they tested for just a fraction of the 239,000 chemicals in registries worldwide! (You can read my article at www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol11no1.pdf.)

The CDC cautions that study participants had varying levels of these materials and lower amounts might not cause harm. However, common sense suggests that it’s not a good idea to be exposed to, and carry in our bodies, multiple toxics known to cause cancer, derail children’s development, and harm our immune, neurological, and reproductive systems. Even worse, we’re being subjected to ongoing exposures without our consent, making us part of an enormous unmonitored experiment with our health.

The Concerns About PFCs

In terms of perfluorochemicals (or PFCs), they’re not just in our pans, but also in carpets, clothes, food bags, and more, going under well-known brand

names such as Teflon[®], Scotchgard[™], Stainmaster[®], and GoreTex[®]. They’re also used in making everything from airplanes to computers to cosmetics.

Unfortunately, the usefulness of PFCs comes at a serious cost. The Environmental Working Group (EWG) says that PFCs are “highly-toxic, extraordinarily-persistent chemicals that pervasively contaminate human blood and wildlife the world over.” Health impacts include increased cancer and stroke risk, elevated cholesterol, weakened immune systems, lower birth weights, and disrupted thyroid hormones.

The EPA has persuaded eight manufacturers to phase out one PFC, PFOA, by 2015. However, there are many other harmful PFCs, and companies are still calling them “safe.” (For more about PFCs, see www.ewg.org/EWG-Guide-to-PFCs and www.ewg.org/featured/228.)

So What About Nonstick Pans?

There’s varying information about the specific health risks of nonstick pans, but I see enough data to warrant concern, such as the fact that cooking fumes from pans can kill nearby pet birds. Therefore, this is my suggested approach:

1) Avoid using nonstick pans as much as possible. Any materials coming off the pan will go straight into your body. You can cook most foods with stainless steel, glass, enamel, and ceramic pans. I personally invested in a couple of high-quality surgical stainless steel pots, because I find that they make my food taste especially delicious, plus they easily steam veggies, which helps me eat healthy. I first heard about these through a persuasive Saladmaster demonstration, although I bought Kitchen Craft products because they had better pricing on individual pieces.

2) If you use nonstick pans, choose quality not cheap products. I’ve fried my eggs for years in an *anodized*

aluminum nonstick skillet, which I like. I chose this pan because the bonding process is said to create a tough nonreactive scratch-resistant coating. I’ve looked at the new “green” nonsticks, but haven’t found one yet that offers “no PFCs” and gets good reviews for its nonstick ability. (Let me know if you find one!)

3) Be sure everyone cooking with your nonstick pans cares for them properly. This usually includes avoiding high heat, metal tools, and abrasives. Read the instructions and possibly post them! If you have a degraded pan, toss it.

4) Identify and reduce your exposure to PFCs in other products. Get good suggestions at www.ewg.org/news/nine-ways-avoid-household-toxins.

5) Take community-level action. Because PFC exposure is too extensive and complex to solve at just the consumer level, it’s vital that we also insist on stronger government action to protect us. A good first step is to demand real strengthening of TSCA at www.saferchemicals.org/safe-chemicals-act.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of [The Organic Guides](#), and Editor and Lead Writer for [The Next STEP](#) newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see “Ask EcoGirl” on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.

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