

Dangerous Candles

BY SUSAN MUEHLHERR

After the evening meal is enjoyed and dishes put away, I like nothing more to fill the house with candles. Their flickering flames and gentle scents seem to clean the air and calm the spirit.

So, it was with horrible surprise that I learned my candles were dangerous to my family's health! Many scented candles contain and release phthalates, potentially harmful chemicals that have been linked to the disruption of hormonal systems and other health problems in people exposed to them. Burning candles can also emit small amounts of acetaldehyde, formaldehyde and naphthalene, organic chemicals that are also potentially harmful and can leave nasty black soot deposits on floors and other surfaces.

According to Pamela Lundquist of the nonprofit Children's Health Environmental Coalition (CHEC), this black soot deposit "is primarily made up of elemental carbon, but may also contain phthalates and volatile organic compounds like benzene and toluene, which can cause cancer and neurological damage."

Children can easily ingest these chemicals if their hands have been wandering and end up in their mouths. The chemicals can lodge deep in the lungs, disrupting the lower respiratory tract, exacerbating existing problems like asthma, and potentially causing other longer term breathing problems.

Despite laws against it, many candlewicks still contain lead, long linked to impaired learning and brain damage in children. Lead dispersed from burning candles can be breathed in and also constitutes part of the dreaded black soot deposit. Consumers can avoid them by sticking to candles with soft cotton wicks, not stiff, metal ones.

Eco-conscious candle burners should also avoid paraffin-based candles, which are made from waxes derived in the process of refining crude oil and literally consist of fossil-fuel generating hydrocarbons.



Unfortunately, the vast majority of commercially available candles are made from paraffin, though many alternatives are now available.

Soy-based candles are a popular choice, as they are made from plant waste and emit less soot than the paraffin variety. Beeswax candles are another nice alternative as well, especially if you can pick them up at a local farmers' market. For scented or aromatherapy candles, look for varieties that use only pure plant essential oils instead of synthetic chemicals with unintelligible names.


This fall I'm picking up some beeswax sheets at the craft store. My family will appreciate safe candles, hand made by me — and I'll rest easier knowing that they won't be breathing in chemicals that I can't even pronounce. X

— Susan Muehlherr, Editor of Scouting Life, with excerpts from Earth Talk, a weekly E-column.

All Things Green

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