



Environmental Defence Guide to Triclosan

How to avoid the pervasive anti-bacterial chemical that pollutes our bodies and the environment

What is it?

Triclosan is an antimicrobial/antibacterial agent whose use has become widespread in hand sanitizers, toothpaste mouthwashes, deodorants, cosmetics, fabrics, plastics and other products. No studies have demonstrated that triclosan provides any additional benefits over using ordinary soap and water when it comes to cleaning hands to protect against infectious diseases.



Who is exposed to it?

Everyone. As triclosan is found in more and more products, it is also finding its way into our water and our food. While watching product ingredient lists for triclosan can help us avoid it to some extent, it is likely that we are still exposed to it in small amounts.

Why is it a concern?

Increasing levels of triclosan in people and the environment have been linked to several negative health effects. It can cause allergies and asthma by weakening the immune system; it disrupts the hormonal system; it can build up in our bodies; and, it belongs to a class of chemicals that are suspected of causing cancer in humans. Studies have also shown that when triclosan is exposed to sunlight in water, it breaks down into dioxins, chemicals that are toxic to humans and harmful to the environment. It can also react with chemicals in treated water, producing chloroform, a human carcinogen.

There is also growing concern about antibacterials and their contribution to the growth of bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics. These “superbugs” have the potential to create serious antibiotic-resistance problems with the pervasiveness of antibacterial products.

Some triclosan can be removed from water in wastewater treatment, but all cannot be fully eliminated. Substantial discharges are also likely from laundries, hair salons, medical facilities, and other commercial and industrial sites. As a result, triclosan has been found in high concentrations in streams, killing algae and destroying aquatic ecosystems.

Where is it used?

Triclosan was originally designed to kill germs in hospitals and other institutional settings where bacterial infections are of concern. It has since become prevalent in soap and other personal hygiene products. A survey of consumer products in 2000 found that over 75 per cent of liquid soaps and

nearly 30 per cent of bar soaps (45 per cent of all the soaps on the market) contained some type of antibacterial agent. Triclosan was the most common agent found.

Our culture's recent germ-phobia has made way for the introduction of antibacterial agents in a wide array of other consumer products, from washcloths to toys to kitchen gadgets to socks to garbage bags. The smaller concentrations found on or in these objects might not even be effective in killing germs on our hands, and in many cases, they are found on or in products that need to be washed regularly anyway.

What are the alternatives?

Proper handwashing with soap and water has proven to be as effective at preventing sickness and eliminating bacteria as triclosan, without the negative effects. If soap and water are not available, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer can be safely used as an alternative.

Products containing triclosan must say so on their label, so check product ingredient lists for triclosan (or the brand name Microban). This goes for home and personal products like soap, detergent, and mouthwash, but also for fabrics and plastic goods like toothbrushes, socks, and kitchen gadgets.



What is Canada doing about Triclosan?

On March 30, 2012, Health Canada and Environment Canada published a preliminary assessment of triclosan. The assessment concluded that triclosan can be harmful to the environment, and risk management options for the chemical are now being considered. Environmental Defence recommends a ban on the household use of triclosan.

What can you do?

1. Avoid purchasing products that are labelled anti-bacterial, or items that contain the following: **Amicor, Aquasept, Bactonix, Irgasan DP300, Microban, Monolith, Sanitized, Sapoderm, Ster-Zac, and Ultra-Fresh**. Always check product labels for triclosan and don't buy products that contain it.
2. Call on Health Canada to support a household ban on triclosan. Sign the petition at action.environmentaldefence.ca/take-triclosan.
3. Visit justbeautiful.ca to download a pocket shopping guide listing triclosan, and other toxic chemicals to avoid in personal care products.
4. Make a donation to help us in our work to get toxins out of Canadian homes and bodies. Visit environmentaldefence.ca/donate to support our work today.