

SUSTAINABILITY LIVING GUIDE: 49. ARE YOU SUDSING YOURSELF SICK?¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

Triclosan-containing products can be found in every room in the house, but dodging the pesticide isn't as hard as you may think. Antibacterial soap? How about antibacterial bodies? With cold and flu season right around the corner, the thought of germ-killing chemicals pulsing through our veins may seem appealing at first mention, but the truth is, antimicrobial chemicals like triclosan are injected into so many everyday products that levels of the chemical—listed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as a *pesticide*—is sharply rising inside our bodies. That's a serious health threat for people of all ages, because the estrogenic chemical can interfere with hormones needed for the brain and reproductive systems to develop correctly, and has been linked to infertility and other problems. Research also links the growing use of triclosan to the rise in antibiotic-resistant infections that are expensive to treat and sometimes fatal.

THE DETAILS: According to a U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report released late this summer, our bodies, on average, now harbor 50 percent more triclosan than they did just six years ago. The updated data found that the increase occurred in all age groups, in both men and women, and in all ethnicities. The highest exposures were observed in people over 20 years old, females, and Mexican-Americans. The data comes on the heels of a University of Toledo study that found triclosan is taken up by food crops, in this instance, soybeans, a crop that's used in a dizzying array of processed foods.

WHAT IT MEANS: If we're soaking our bodies with unhealthy chemicals in the name of killing germs, it must be worth it, right? That's the kicker. The Food and Drug Administration, the American Medical Association, and other leading public-health organizations have found that these chemical germ killers work *no better* than regular soap. "The widespread and unregulated use of antimicrobials such as triclosan and triclocarban must end. In just two years, human exposure to triclosan has dramatically risen, and now there is evidence that our food supply could also be contaminated with these chemicals," says Sarah Janssen, MD, a physician and scientist with Natural Resources Defense Council. "With no proven benefit and many red flags raised for harmful health impacts, the use of these so-called antimicrobials is an unnecessary and stupid use of toxic chemicals."

Here's how to be anti-antibacterial and keep triclosan out of your body:

- **Read personal-care product labels:** Things that we eat and put on our bodies need to include ingredient labels by law. Dr. Janssen says when purchasing products like toothpaste, lotion, soap, body washes, deodorants, or acne cream, we should make sure triclosan or triclocarban are not on the label. For safer personal-care product options, or to check the ones you already use, check the Skin Deep Cosmetic Safety Database.
- **Eyeball suspicious claims:** It's not just soap. "Triclosan is also used in food-contact substances like cutting boards and kitchen utensils, and in clothing like 'antibacterial' shirts and shoes," Dr. Janssen warns, noting that the latter is likely not as high of an exposure as when the product is applied directly to your skin. Stay away from products marketed as

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"odor-free," "germ-free," or anything bearing the Microban trademark. That's another term used for triclosan. Check out this Environmental Working Group guide to learn about other common household items that could be triclosan-containing products.

- **Buy organic food:** What does triclosan in soap have to do with buying organic food? Turns out, human sewage sludge applied to food crops (yes, that's allowed in nonorganic agriculture) might be laced with the triclosan and triclocarban that we wash down the drain. A study published in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology* this summer discovered that soybean roots absorb triclosan and triclocarban; the chemicals then migrate to the bean. Sewage sludge, also often contaminated with pharmaceuticals and heavy metals, is strictly banned in organic agriculture.