



Baby Bottle Chemical Is Removed

The makers of babies' bottles in the US are to remove a controversial chemical from their products, amid growing concern over its possible effects.

The six manufacturers say they are reacting to consumer demand by removing Bisphenol A (BPA) from their bottles.

But they will continue selling bottles containing BPA in the UK, a decision which has angered campaigners.

The Food Standards Agency insists BPA in UK plastic products is "well below the levels considered harmful".

The chemical is widely used in plastic manufacture and is commonly found in food and drink containers.

Heated bottles

There has been growing concern about the possible effects of BPA leaching into babies' feed when bottles are heated.

The current advice for parents is not to pour boiling liquid directly into bottles, not to microwave them or use scratched or worn ones.

Research carried out at Exeter University found that adults with high levels of BPA in their system were more prone to heart disease and diabetes

Dr Iain Lang, who led the study, said: "There is not enough to provide us with the evidence to say there is definitely a link, there is definitely something going on."

"But in addition to some of the previous work that has been done looking at younger children and looking at animals this does increase the likelihood that there are problems associated with BPA."

In 2008, Canada formally declared BPA a hazardous substance and announced plans to ban the import or sale of bottles containing it.

Now six of the leading manufacturers in the US have voluntarily withdrawn it, but only for domestic sales.

Belinda Phipps, chief executive of the National Childbirth Trust, said: "It's time the companies in the UK followed suit with what

the companies in America and Canada are doing.

"We shouldn't have bottles on the market that leach BPA. Parents would like to choose not have BPA in their babies' feeds and they don't find that choice easy right now."

'Very cautious'

The US Food and Drug Administration says it is reviewing new information on BPA, while in Britain, the FSA says it has looked into the potential risks and found exposure levels to be well below that considered harmful.

Nevertheless, Dr Howard Stoate, a member of the Commons health committee, said the American companies had made the right decision.

"This chemical has been called into question," he said.

"More research clearly needs to be done, [but] as a precaution I think these companies are right to withdraw it and I would like to see the FSA in this country looking hard at the research and taking the view that until we know the full truth we ought to be very cautious about these chemicals."

The chemical industry says BPA is one of the most extensively-tested chemicals, and new EU legislation will ensure its safety.

But the major UK retailers of baby bottles do stock BPA-free alternatives and one leading manufacturer, NUK, has bowed to pressure and removed BPA from all of its products.

Steve Elliot, chief executive of the Chemical Industries Association, said: "There's been lots of work done, whether it's been by the Food and Drug Administration in the States, whether it's by the Food Standards Authority at a European level or the FSA in the UK."

"Lots of data, lots of research, lots of sampling and none of those tests suggest that there is a risk to human health."

Khat Use Spreads To British Youth

'Khat' is a popular stimulant chewed across east Africa. Now it is crossing cultural divides and becoming a drug of choice for an increasing number of young people in the UK.

The khat plant, *Catha edulis*, has been chewed by east Africans for hundreds of years and plays a large part in the social lives of both men and women.

It is banned across America, Canada and most of Europe, but remains legal in Britain.

Khat user Steve [not his real name] is a philosophy student. He is one of an increasing number of students who are taking up the habit.

Steve, who is 22, comes from a good middle-class family and in a slightly apologetic tone he tells me he was drawn to the leaves because they looked harmless.

"They looked really natural, not like a normal drug and they were all wrapped up in this really shiny banana leaf."

Crossing divides

Chewing khat according to those who do it, gives them a mellow high. Some describe it as a cross between cannabis and cocaine.

"You're really alert," says Steve, "but at the same time you have a bit of the feeling you have on cannabis... not hallucinations but going that sort of way."

In Somalia, khat is popular among taxi drivers and farm workers - people who have to stay alert while the rest of us are tucked up in bed.

In the UK, some students are using it for the same reasons, saying it helps them stay up all night studying.

It is relatively easy to get, and it's cheap too - your average bundle costs about £3 (\$4.20).

When I went in search of some for this piece, I was pointed in the direction of an Ethiopian butchers in north London.

They had sold out, but assured me they were expecting a fresh batch to be delivered in a couple of days.

The woman behind the counter suggested I try down the road.

Next stop and sure enough there it was, nestled innocently between the cucumbers and courgettes.

"Aren't you worried about selling it," I ask.

"No, why should I be?" The store owner asks, with a slightly bemused look on his face.

"It's legal, we pay taxes and people want to buy it, so I sell it."

Controversial status

But there growing concern that khat houses are trying to appeal more to younger users.



And that according to Asha, a teenager we meet at a community centre in east London, is setting a dangerous precedent.

"I see so many kids who...start because they just want to try it, but then they end up going there 24/7," he says.

"I know [people who] have ended up dropping out of college because they've been up chewing all night and can't get out of bed. Plus you get people selling other harder drugs in there."

But it's not just the impact on academic results critics are concerned about.

Psychiatrist Dr Eleni Palezido reckons that khat can be a catalyst for mental health problems.

"When you stop taking khat all the dopamine (a chemical associated with feelings of pleasure in the brain) leaves your system, so people get depressed, they can get paranoid, hear voices and it can lead to a full blown psychotic state."

Cathinone and cathine are the main ingredients of the plant. Both are class C drugs in the UK, but the plant khat itself is not classified and can be bought openly in shops.

Cathinone is almost identical to

amphetamines and it is this that creates a high. It's known to cause mental health problems like psychosis and depression.

And that is one of the reasons why some in the medical profession, like Dr Palezido, are worried.

"Young people have no idea about the dangers, they think because it's legal it must be ok, but it's not."

So far, the Government has been reluctant to introduce a ban on khat.

Although, the Home Office told us they were "continuing to monitor the situation."

Around seven tonnes of khat arrives at Heathrow every week from Ethiopia, Kenya and Yemen.

The fact that it is legal here has meant the UK has become something of an international hub for illicit trade in khat to other countries where it is banned.

There are no official figures on how many young British people are using khat, but Asha reckons the politicians should act now before it's too late.

"The government should be doing something about it. They think it's just Somalis who are doing it but it's not...everyone's now getting involved."

Oxygen Therapy Benefit In Autism

A decompression chamber may help children with autism, say researchers.

After 40 hours of hyperbaric treatment autistic children showed significant improvements in social interaction and eye contact compared with controls.

The BMC Pediatrics study could not show if the results were long-lasting but should prompt further investigation of the treatment, the US team said.

One theory is that oxygen can help reduce inflammation and improve flow of oxygen to brain tissue.

Hyperbaric treatment - effectively giving high concentrations of oxygen at increased atmospheric pressure - has been shown to have some benefit in other neurological conditions such as foetal alcohol syndrome and cerebral palsy.

Some studies have looked at the treatment in children with autism but they have not compared with a dummy procedure raising questions around a "placebo effect".

In the latest study, carried out at six centres in the US, 62 children aged two to seven with autism were randomly assigned to receive 40 hours of treatment over a month with 24% oxygen at increased atmospheric pressure (1.3 atm) or normal air in a slightly pressurised room (1.03 atm).

Children who received the treatment showed significant improvements in overall functioning, receptive language, social interaction, eye contact, and sensory or cognitive awareness.

In all, 30% in the treatment group were rated by doctors as "very much improved" or "much improved" compared with 8% of those in the control group.

Overall, 80% in the treatment group

improved compared with 38% of controls.

Behaviour

Study leader, Dr Dan Rossignol from the International Child Development Resource Centre, in Florida, said the use of hyperbaric therapy for autism has been gaining popularity in the US where parents can buy their own hyperbaric chamber if they have a spare \$14-17,000.

He said the findings would be quite controversial and he too was initially very sceptical of the idea but was prompted to do more research after the treatment showed benefits for his two sons who have autism.

"We're certainly not talking about a cure, we're talking about improvements in behaviour, improving certain functions and quality of life."

"The next step is to try to find out which kids do respond, because it's an expensive treatment - it may be that kids with more inflammation respond better."

"It would also be nice to know how long the treatment lasts, and the finding needs to be confirmed."

Richard Mills, research director at Research Autism, said this was the first well-designed study looking at the therapy.

"We know this kind of therapy is useful in a number of neurological conditions and that's been well established."

"What we don't know is how useful it is in

autism, what we could be seeing is an improvement in other neurological conditions that go alongside autism.

"We also don't know about long-term effects - it could be a transitory effect."

Professor Philip James, an expert in hyperbaric medicine at the University of Dundee, said the pressure used was no more than that used to pressurise an aircraft cabin on the ground.

He added that oxygen was the "controller of inflammation" but also had other effects on regulation of genes and tissue regeneration.

But even if proven, the treatment may not be for everybody.

"When you have any condition, there are people who have too much damage to get better."

"All the oxygen is doing is bringing things towards normal."

