Teflon-coated Cookware: To Use or not to Use?

Did you hear? It may not be just the food you cook that could be unhealthy: your cookware could put you at risk, as well. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced last month that those Teflon-coated non-stick pots and pans we all love so much may actually be deadly. The culprit is perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), a chemical that is released as a byproduct during the production of Teflon, but that is not, at least in theory, present in the final product.

Much of the recent scare surrounding Teflon stems from the numerous scientific studies done by the EPA and other peer-reviewed research groups. In 2005, the EPA released a stating that PFOA was linked to several types of cancer, as well as birth defects and immunosuppression, in animal test subjects. Based on these findings, it’s suspected that PFOA is likely also a human carcinogen. These reports state that when Teflon is heated to extremely high temperatures, it releases toxic fumes: a Teflon-coated pan heated to 680°F will begin to release PFOA, among other toxic chemicals, and at even higher temperatures will begin to release substances analogous to those used in chemical warfare.

So are you ready to throw out anything bearing the name Teflon yet? Not so fast. While it’s true that PFOA was formed when your Teflon-coated cookware was made, you may not be at any risk of exposure just by cooking with it if you’re careful. The process in which these pots and pans are made involves “curing” the material at high heat, which eliminates PFOA from the finished product. Any residual traces of PFOA should only escape at extremely high temperatures (around 680°F), if at all. By comparison, the oils in food begin to smoke around 375°F. So unless you’re in the habit of leaving your cookware sitting over high heat unattended for extended periods of time, and you lack a functional smoke detector in your kitchen, your Teflon pots and pans are probably safe enough to use. If you’re still not convinced, a group of FDA scientists recently published a report in which they found that Teflon-coated cookware heated well past 600°F did not produce or release additional PFOA that could be transferred to food cooked in it. Even the trace amounts of PFOA present in new Teflon-coated cookware were so minimal that they likely present no health risks to the consumer.

So where are these health risk reports coming from? PFOA exposure is a real danger to those workers employed in plants manufacturing Teflon, and to a lesser degree, to those people who live near such plants. And there are other products on the market that can expose consumers to potentially dangerous levels of PFOA, such as some fast food containers, sealant films, and even bags of microwave popcorn. The grease-resistant coating put on some of these products contains PFOA, which can be transferred to the food they come in contact with. Still, there’s not enough scientific evidence to know for sure whether or not exposure at these levels presents a risk to the consumer’s health.
The biggest concern is that PFOA accumulates in the body, and no one is quite sure yet how this long-term exposure - even to seemingly insignificant doses - will affect us.

However, if you’re worried about PFOA exposure and the potential health risks associated with it, there are several precautions you can take. Avoid personal hygiene products that list “fluoro” or “perfluoro” among the ingredients (such as some types of hand lotion, nail polish, shaving cream, and makeup), reduce your consumption of fast food and other foods that could come in PFOA-coated containers, and stick to using cookware that lacks a non-stick coating. Alternatives such as hard anodized aluminum and copper core pots and pans, including those made by All-Clad and Calphalon, present no health risks. As an added benefit, they actually make cooking, if not cleanup, easier, and the resulting food usually tastes better anyway. Plus, reducing sales of Teflon products means reducing amounts of PFOA produced and released overall, which can improve not only your health, but the health of countless others, as well.

- eGM Staff Writer

Sources and Additional Reading:


