

Students raise awareness of household toxins

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NORTHFIELD - A group of Carleton College students are looking to detoxify Northfield.

The students, who form a local branch of the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group, have joined a campaign called Detox Minnesota, which aims to phase out products marketed to children that contain two toxic chemicals, bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates. The two can be found in the most common household goods: sippy cups for children, Nalgene water bottles, plastic toys, the lining of tin cans.

Multiple studies have shown that BPA and phthalates can cause health problems, including the creation of artificial estrogens that the body can't break down, leading to early puberty, obesity and autoimmune disease.

"There are more than 80,000 chemicals that have become widely used since World War II, about 200 of which have been tested in the United States, and just five of which have been banned," wrote Jill Rodde, an organizer of the effort, in an e-mail. "In contrast, the European Union is in the process of banning about 30,000 of those chemicals."

Rodde said the main thrust of the group's efforts is to work with Northfield's City Council to pass a resolution asking local businesses to stop selling products with BPA and phthalates. She said the issue was important because she was surprised to find how few chemicals are tested before they are consumed as part of products used every day.

"Not surprisingly, not a lot of people know about how plastic is made and with what, and certainly people don't know the health problems that can result from the chemicals in plastic being in our body," Rodde said. "It's an issue that's kind of difficult to frame, so we struggle with teaching other people about it, and making it seem like something that's changeable rather than just the latest sign of the apocalypse."

The group, working with Brian Erickson, the city's liaison to the Environmental Quality Commission, hopes to connect with councilor Kris Vohs on the measure.

Vohs thinks the council would be receptive. He helped pass a resolution that regulated the type of chemicals used in the city's parks.

"We have a pretty environmentally aware council," Vohs said. "I'm interested in knowing more about it. If it's as much of a danger as they say, I think there would be support."

-Reporter Catherine Roberts contributed to this story.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get involved by informing yourself about what chemicals are out there, and where they are in your home.

For example, almost anything with a fragrance contains phthalates, which bind the scent to the skin. Go to www.safecosmetics.org to find out more about the products in your home.

If you're interested in supporting a local measure asking retailers to stop selling products containing BPA and phthalates, contact your councilor.

More information on Detox MN is available at <http://www.mpirg.org/DetoxMN/index.htm>