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PBDEs and nursing mothers: Arnold Schechter

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A little-known but highly toxic chemical used to make foam and electronics fire resistant is turning up in disturbingly high amounts in the breast milk of American women. Two recent studies, one released Tuesday, found that not only were 100% of the women tested contaminated with brominated flame retardants, but the levels were the highest in the world, 10 to 100% times higher than those in Europe. In animals, several studies have shown that these flame retardants, called polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs, can cause cognitive and behavior changes during development, lowered intelligence, higher cancer rates, nervous system damage and reproductive development and immune system problems. And the problem's only getting worse. Linda Birnbaum of the Environmental Protection Agency says the levels of PBDEs are doubling in humans every two to five years, an almost exponential rate. The chemical bioaccumulates in fat and experts believe that the major source is from the animal fat we eat, though at least one study also found it in microscopic form in house dust. What are new mothers to do in light of this information that their breast milk is likely contaminated with flame-retarding toxins? And what should the rest of us do? Chat with Arnold Schechter about this topic.

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