

What Lies Beneath

Your furniture looks good, but is it good for you? Here's some startling news about a health hazard that may be lurking in your living room and what you can do about it. *By Jennifer Uscher*

When you buy a piece of upholstered furniture, your biggest concerns are usually aesthetic ones: Will that red cotton twill go with the rug? Is that slipcover too casual? Will a sectional overwhelm the room? That makes sense. After all, most of us keep our upholstered furniture for more than 10 years. But as you pore over fabrics and ponder cushion styles, what you may not realize is that the most important element to consider is invisible.

For the past 30 years, flame-retardant chemicals known as polybrominated diphenylethers (PBDEs) have been added to polyurethane foam—which is found in most upholstered furniture, as well as in other household goods. “Every time you sit down, it’s likely that a little puff of PBDE comes out of your chair or sofa,” says Robert Bigsby, a professor at the Indiana University School of Medicine. PBDEs are a real problem. In animal studies, they have been linked with thyroid and reproductive problems, suppression of the immune system, and disruption of the development of the fetal brain, causing deficits in learning and memory. PBDEs may also break down in the body to form a compound that behaves like an estrogen and may stimulate the growth of breast-cancer cells, Bigsby says. No studies to date have looked at the effects of PBDE exposure on human health, but scientists are concerned because these chemicals are released from products during manufacture, use, and disposal, and they are accumulating in the environment and in human tissues.

The United States is one of the world’s largest consumers and



Out of Sight

The foam in some upholstered furniture is treated with flame-retardant chemicals that are migrating into the environment—and humans.

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