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Your car could be making you sick

Study: Chemicals, heat pose risks

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Chemicals that settled as dust and film on floors and windows of cars and trucks, especially in hot weather, are found at levels that could pose health problems, according to a study released Wednesday.

Samples from randomly selected 2000-2005 model year cars and trucks made by 11 manufacturers had levels of the chemicals up to five times higher than is typical in homes and offices, according to the report by the Ecology Center, based in Ann Arbor. It urged car companies to use less-toxic alternatives -- noting that several already are.

Uncertainty over safe levels of the chemicals -- the fire retardant family of polybrominated diphenyl ethers known as PBDEs and the plastic-softeners called phthalates -- makes it difficult to gauge the risks from the levels found in cars. The study was not subject to the rigorous professional screening process known as peer review.

But scientists said Wednesday that the news adds to a growing sense of worry that the widely used chemicals may be accumulating at dangerous levels in humans -- damaging developing fetuses and children in ways that are only starting to be understood.

Immediate reaction from Detroit's automakers was muted.

Eron Shosteck, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers which represents the major companies, said the

What can I do?

Many toxic chemicals are more likely to be released in car interiors when they are hot -- such as when a closed car bakes in the summer sun. How can you reduce your risk?

- Park in the shade or crack your windows open when possible.
- Use a reflective sunscreen that fits across the inside of the windshield.
- Allow your car to ventilate for a few minutes before closing yourself in.
- Frequently clean dust

study didn't make the case to change practices.

"There no indication that there's a need for that," he said. "These flame retardants are critical in protecting the occupants of automobiles."

Ford spokeswoman Karen Shaughnessy said the report will be reviewed.

and film from interior vehicle surfaces.

Source: Ecology Center

Ford has engineering standards that prohibit the use of substances of concern to ensure that our customers are driving environmentally safe vehicles, she said. Ford is actively engaged in the reduction of in-vehicle volatile organic compounds and flame retardants through material and process development, she added.

A DaimlerChrysler spokesman said DCX has no research program on the chemicals.

Shosteck noted that the two most criticized types of PBDE are no longer used in the United States as part of a voluntary agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency. The remaining type is not regulated.

Scientists not directly involved in the study said it is groundbreaking because few scientists have tested the dust and film inside cars. But they added that it's unclear whether anyone should be alarmed.

"It's hard to say exactly what the implications of this study are," said Heather Stapleton, assistant professor of environmental chemistry at Duke University. Stapleton, who is familiar with the study, said the presence of the chemicals doesn't mean they can be easily absorbed by humans.

The intense heat from sealed automobiles baking in the sun is likely to release more of the chemicals -- and break them down into more dangerous and easily absorbed toxics, she said.

Jeff Gearhart, the study's principal author, agreed: A hot car "is the ideal environment for release of these chemicals."

Some carmakers have stopped using the chemicals. Ford reported that it has eliminated PBDEs from interior components that customers come in contact with, according to the study. Volvo has prohibited the use of three types of phthalates and all PBDEs.

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