

[00:00:13.750] - Tracy Gregoire

Hello, everyone. My name is Tracy Gregoire, and I am the Healthy Children Project director for the Learning Disabilities Association of America. People may wonder why LDA works on chemicals. And today we're going to have a great podcast talking about some chemicals that have some links or possible links to neurological harm. LDA works on chemicals because we know that over a quarter of learning and developmental disabilities are linked to environmental factors, including chemicals that harm children's brain health. And Lds. Healthy Children Project advocates for safer products and healthier food, water and air that are free of neurotoxins. Today, I'm really excited to have Liz Hitchcock with Safer Chemicals Healthy Families join us to talk about PFAS chemicals and what we can all do to protect everyone from these nasty chemicals. So, Liz, thank you so much for joining us today. Would you tell us a little bit about what you do and a little bit about safer chemicals, Healthy Families?

[00:01:17.220] - Liz Hitchcock

Sure. Thanks, Tracy. And thanks at the beginning just for having us on the podcast. I'm Liz Hitchcock and a director for Chemicals Healthy Families. We started more than ten years ago to work on federal chemical policy, and we are now all about using the tools that we have to protect the American public from unsafe chemicals and unsafe products. I've been doing this kind of work for more than 30 years. I started working on cleaning up individual hazardous waste sites in Massachusetts and have worked in New Jersey, in Florida, and in Washington DC, on public health protections from toxic chemicals. So I'm very happy to join you today to talk about a class of chemicals that has really become a staple in everyday life that we need to get on the right side of.

[00:02:28.190] - Tracy Gregoire

Thanks Liz. So PFAS chemicals my understanding that there's over 9,000 of these chemicals. I used to say 5,000, but it seems like the data now suggests there's over 9,000 of PFAS chemicals in use. Can you share a little bit about how people are exposed and why we should be concerned about PFAS chemicals?

[00:02:48.720] - Liz Hitchcock

Sure. The PFAS chemicals, the whole family of PFAS chemicals are used in a number of ways and in a number of products. They're used to essentially to make a product waterproof, grease proof and stain proof. So if you think of the things that are in your life that are keeping you from getting wet, keeping grease from leaking through on your hands or keeping stains from sticking on your carpet, those are the chemicals that we're talking about. They are used in everything from the foam that firefighters use to blanket a fire and put out a fire to food packaging to make sure that the grease from a hamburger doesn't come through or the dressing on a salad doesn't come through onto your clothes. And they're used to keep your sofa or your carpet from getting stained. So they have a number of uses that are in our everyday lives and the problem is that the way all of these, this whole class of thousands of chemicals is

built, they're built to last, which is a big selling point for them. If you are wanting to use them to waterproof your raincoat or grease proof your food packaging, the desirable outcome is that they last.

[00:04:33.210] - Liz Hitchcock

The undesirable thing about them is that they last and they last and persist in the environment. And so they don't break down when they go through the water treatment facility and go into drinking water or used as sludge to treat a field. So we're stuck with them. They persist in the environment and they have a number of health effects that when they come into our bodies through our drinking water, through the water we take a shower with, through the products that we handle, they stick around. We just did a report where we tested the breast milk of 50 mothers in the Seattle area and every single one of them had PFAS in their breast milk. There have been other tests where we test the blood of Americans. And most of us, more than 95% of us have PFAS found in our blood. So we all have been exposed. We are exposed in our everyday lives. And so the question is how do we clean up the mess that's been made and the contamination of our water and how do we keep from making the mess worse? How do we stop using these dangerous chemicals and how do we protect ourselves for the future?

[00:06:10.640] - Liz Hitchcock

And I always think of the I don't know whose rule of holes it was, but if you find yourself in a hole, the first thing you want to do is stop digging. And this is the stop digging strategy. Let's stop using these persistent forever chemicals in our everyday lives. And the science has been following because we are developing alternatives that have the same desirable properties. Keep the grease off our hands from a hamburger, keep the water from soaking through our raincoats, keep the stains off our carpets, put out the fires without using these PFAS chemicals. So if we say no to them, the very same companies will find a way to make their products without these chemicals.

[00:07:05.930] - Tracy Gregoire

Absolutely. I say if we can send people to the moon, we can figure out proven, safe alternatives to some of these really nasty chemicals. Right? It just has to be a priority. You talked a little bit about how PFAS is in nearly every American. So I just want to explain a little bit about why LDA is working on PFAS chemicals. The CDC States that some studies and people have shown that certain PFAS chemicals may affect learning and behavior of infants and older children. These include potential effects on children's cognitive and neurobehavioral development. PFAS chemicals have also been linked to immune dysfunction, which is obviously a concern during COVID. PFAS chemicals have been linked to endocrine disruption, obesity, diabetes, even certain types of cancer. So not only are they persistent biochemicals and nicotine forever chemicals. Right. There are real health effects to people. For those folks who have seen Dark Waters, you know a little bit about PFAS chemicals and how a West Virginia town was contaminated and all the health effects of the people there. But we also know that PFAS is showing up in our drinking water, in our soil, in our milk, even in the air that we breathe.

[00:08:33.140] - Tracy Gregoire

So there's exposure across the United States in every state. So this is one of the reasons why Safer Chemicals Healthy Families and LDA and other partners are working on PFAS. I know all of this can be a little bit overwhelming. So, Liz, let's talk a little bit about what we can do and what are some of the wins we've recently had on PFAS chemicals and what are some opportunities coming up to work on getting rid of these chemicals?

[00:09:04.250] - Liz Hitchcock

Sure. Thanks, Tracy. One of the things that we have been and consumers have been very successful at doing is saying no to PFAS in the products that they purchase. One of the great success stories that we've had is on PFAS in food packaging. And to say it once again, PFAS is used to make the packaging that we buy a salad in, that we buy a burger in, that we cook food in, grease resistant and easy to clean. In the case for those who remember Teflon pans, which was one of the biggest uses of PFAS that people remember. But we did testing where we discovered that there was PFAS being used in the packaging that you would get a to-go order from. And as we've all worked from home and spent more time at home, we've had more takeout food in the last couple of years. So that was a very important thing to recognize is that the takeout containers either from a sit down restaurant or from your supermarket hot bar or from a fast food or fast casual restaurant, all had been treated with PFAS chemicals. And what consumers have very successfully done is called on the companies.

[00:10:42.350] - Liz Hitchcock

And our Mind Store Campaign calls on the biggest companies to say no to PFAS and to use the safer alternatives. So we have been successful in getting everybody from Whole Foods to McDonald's to make a commitment to no longer use PFAS chemicals. So they're phasing out the use of these PFAS chemicals. You can't do that work just restaurant by restaurant, retailer by retailer. And so states like the state of Maine, where Tracy is, and other states, including, and I'm reading, I apologize, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, New York, Vermont and Washington have all passed bans on PFAS in food packaging. And that's tremendous. Those are tremendous victories that consumers worked very hard to convince the retailers to enact. And groups and citizens worked very hard in those states to convince their legislators to act on. But again, we're not done yet. And so there will be a bill reintroduced in this Congress to make it a federal law that we are not going to use PFAS in food containers any longer. In 2019, Representative Dingle introduced to Keep Food Containers Safe from PFAS Act. She is expected to reintroduce that bill very shortly. And we will, of course, support and use the work that we've done so successfully in the states and at the retailers to convince legislators that this is an idea whose time has come that we should not be exposed to what I call a side of PFAS with our salad, with our soup, with our hamburger, and that the alternatives are there.

[00:12:48.890] - Liz Hitchcock

You can actually make a bowl or a packaging wrapper without the use of PFAS chemicals. We actually maintain a set of fact sheets that we share with retailers as we're talking to them about getting out of using PFAS. And we share with restaurants that are interested in no longer using PFAS. We keep a list of the alternatives that are packaging that do not contain PFAS. I think there are some good opportunities on the consumer side to get PFAS out of food packaging. It's one of the biggest uses. So we have that. There are also bills that affect other consumer products, including PFAS and cosmetics. One of the most horrifying things I learned was that waterproof mascara many times contains PFAS chemicals. It doesn't have to, we can move out of those uses. And so that's a piece. We'll also see some federal legislation that continues the battle to end the military's use of PFAS chemicals. We were successful a couple of years ago in convincing Congress in the annual military spending bill to put the military on a timetable for phasing out its use of PFAS chemicals in firefighting foam. We will continue with stopping the military from purchasing products containing PFAS that are used by military personnel.

[00:14:44.090] - Liz Hitchcock

Part of the reason that we focus on the military is that they are one of the biggest users of PFAS, and those are all our tax dollars being spent for this. And there are alternatives to the products that they're using. And if the alternatives don't exist now, if we say don't use them, don't use PFAS products, the industry will make alternatives, right.

[00:15:09.990] - Tracy Gregoire

If we set a deadline and say you haven't up until next year, a couple of years from now, you need to figure this out. They will. Whether it's workers in the plant working with the chemicals or workers who are making the products or military personnel who are using military foam. Right? There is worker exposure as well. So we're not only protecting the consumer, but we're also protecting workers who are more impacted in the communities right where these chemicals end up, who are even more impacted by these chemicals.

[00:15:48.170] - Liz Hitchcock

That's a really important point because the cycle of destruction from PFAS chemicals starts at the production of the chemical itself. Then it moves on to the application of the chemical to the product that it's used on, whether it's your raincoat or the bowl that your salad comes in to disposal, because obviously, fast food packaging is intended to only be on the product for a certain amount of time. Then it goes into the trash. The trash goes into the landfill. The landfill then leaks into the groundwater. We drink using those water sources or bathe using those water sources. We also eat crops that are grown on the soil that is fed by that water. And we are all exposed through the cycle of that the workers in the plant, the members of the community nearby, the people who eat the products that are packaged, the people who

are exposed from the groundwater that the landfill is leaking into, we're all exposed. And again, we say forever chemicals because these chemicals do not break down easily. So they are traveling through the environment and persisting in our bodies.

[00:17:26.870] - Tracy Gregoire

Absolutely. So the whole life cycle of the product as well is really important to look at and who's being exposed throughout that process. You talked a little bit about Mind the Store. I know LDA is proud to be a partner in the Mind the Store Campaign. And some of our folks may have seen our Facebook posts about contacting McDonald's or Burger King. I know LDA sent letters to those two major companies and talked about the health impacts of PFAS chemicals and worked with Mind the Store. So I just wanted to share with people. It's really exciting and it really does help when you nicely tell places where you buy fast food or retailers that you're concerned about PFAS chemicals and you want them to replace these harmful chemicals with safer alternatives. It really does make a difference. And I think, Liz, what Mind the Store has seen too, right, when people speak out, companies make it a priority to find a safer alternative that's healthier for everybody.

[00:18:38.030] - Liz Hitchcock

The Mind the Store campaign has focused on some of the biggest of the fast food fast casual supermarkets in the country. And we kind of start from the idea that retailers don't want to sell you a product that can hurt you. And we are dependent on folks like LDA and other organizations and individuals to talk to the companies and to say to them, look, we don't want a product that is going to hurt our communities, hurt our families. And in the case of food packaging, we released a report about fast food and fast casual companies that were using PFAS in their packaging. All but one of the companies that we profiled in our report has agreed to stop using PFAS in their packaging. The remaining one, Burger King, at their shareholder meeting this summer, actually said that they were experimenting with packaging that did not contain PFAS. So even they are moving out of it. We still would like everyone within the sound of my voice to contact Burger King and let them know that as consumers, you don't want to see that kind of chemical in the packaging that they use. And as Tracy said, companies respond to that because they're hearing from the person on the other side of the cash register about their choices and their concerns about their products.

[00:20:29.380] - Liz Hitchcock

And again, companies respond, it's really interesting.

[00:20:34.360] - Tracy Gregoire

I think you've been in many meetings with corporations. I've been in some phone and interested meetings with corporations. And they always say, well, we need to hear from customers what they want. And as a

mom with a special needs child, I say we shouldn't have to ask for safer products, but they really do need to hear from us that this is something their customers want and are asking them to do. As we've seen, it does often make a difference because these big corporations, they don't make a lot of the products, but they have such a big market share that they can tell their suppliers to get these chemicals out or they won't buy them. So that's kind of why we're targeting retailers and fast food restaurants, big ones, because it has this nice trickle effect so that if Home Depot and Lowe's are getting valid out of vinyl flooring, which happened several years ago, or McDonald's and Taco Bell and other companies are getting right, PFAS out of food packaging, right? It makes it easier for the smaller companies. Right, to also access the safer alternatives as well. So I know we talked a little bit about solutions.

[00:21:53.150] - Tracy Gregoire

I'd like to talk some about resources. I know LDA has our healthychildrenproject.org website and our Facebook and Twitter pages where we post a lot of information on chemicals, how to protect your family, and actions like contacting Burger King, for example. And Liz, I know you've got some wonderful resources as well.

[00:22:19.590] - Liz Hitchcock

I mentioned the alternatives. We have fact sheets on the alternatives and a running list of alternatives to PFAS and food packaging that can be found at our website, Saferchemicals.org. We also have a report card that we release every year where we grade some of the nation's biggest retailers on their progress toward eliminating unsafe chemicals in their product lines. And you can find that at our website, Saferchemicals.org, at the Mind the Store website Mindthestore.org. And we have another site, that's retailerreportcard.org, all of which are typo traps. But you can find more information about alternatives. You can find information about how the retailers where you shop and purchase food are doing on chemicals in their product lines. And you can also find on all three of those websites actions that you can take toward a more toxic free world, whether it is calling on Burger King to commit to stop using PFAS in their food packaging or calling on a member of Congress to take action on a piece of legislation that will get PFAS out of food packaging nationally. You can find that at our website, Saferchemicals.org.

[00:24:07.530] - Tracy Gregoire

Thanks, Liz. And I'd like to just end with some actions that people can take. And we talked a little bit about contacting companies. I know LDA and Safer Chemicals, right, we both send out action alerts and make it easy and simple and give all the information like the phone number and even a sample script of what you can say and some background so you can feel like you're informed, calling legislators and asking them to pass policies that will protect us from PFAS chemicals. It sounds like there will be a number of opportunities at the federal level as well coming up soon. I don't know if you have anything to add to some of those actions.

[00:24:48.990] - Liz Hitchcock

Again, those actions are all posted at our website, Safer Chemicals.org. And in the fall, we do anticipate a number of opportunities to take action on PFAS chemicals, whether it's in the annual military spending bill, in the infrastructure bill that is currently under consideration, or some of the individual bills that I mentioned, like the PFAS and food containers bill and the PFAS and cosmetics bill. These are all opportunities to let your member of Congress and your senators know that you want PFAS out of as many products and you don't want your family and your community exposed to these forever chemicals. And so you can find those actions at our website, Saferchemicals.org.

[00:25:45.270] - Tracy Gregoire

Great. Thank you, Liz. LDA will be sharing those as well and trying to make it easy, Liz. And I will make it as easy as possible to plug into those actions as possible. And I'll just add, like LDA often ask people to share their personal stories because as a mom who has a child with autism, I can know all the stats and figures. But what policy makers and companies I think listen to most is why as a mom, I want safer products or cleaner air, because there's learning and developmental disabilities or neurological harm from air pollution, for example. So encouraging people to share their personal stories about why you want safer products and why you want your air and water and soil free of PFAS chemicals can be really powerful. And writing a letter to the editor or calling a policy maker or calling a company and sharing a little bit about that, you don't have to be an expert on the chemicals. You can just share why you want them to make that change.

[00:26:54.810] - Liz Hitchcock

That is a terribly important point to make, that you don't have to be an expert, that you are the expert on your life and the way that you and your family are being exposed and the steps that you want Congress or retailers to take to protect you and your family and your community from toxic chemicals.

[00:27:23.190] - Tracy Gregoire

Absolutely. Well, thank you, Liz, for joining us today and sharing the really important work you do. I always enjoy working with you and say for chemicals, healthy families. And we look forward to future projects with you.

[00:27:38.670] - Liz Hitchcock

Thanks so much for having me. The Learning Disabilities Association is a very valuable partner in our campaigns and I really appreciate the opportunity to talk with you.

[00:27:59.230] - Lauren

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