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Hazardous waste on your living room floor

Carpet pads commonly sold to consumers in the USA and other developed countries contain dangerous chemicals that can cause nervous system damage, particularly in infants and toddlers.

(Geneva, Switzerland) In the first publicly available study of its kind, a type of foam carpet pad commonly sold in the USA and other developed countries was demonstrated to contain levels of flame retardant chemicals that raise concerns about human health. The substances, PentaBDE and OctaBDE, resemble PCBs in structure and toxic effects.

The study, conducted by IPEN, an international organization working on toxic chemical issues, examined levels of polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDE) in foam carpet pads commonly used in developed countries, including the United States. The types of pads most likely to contain these chemicals are multi-colored.

Two of the flame retardants, PentaBDE and OctaBDE, were recently listed by the Stockholm Convention for global elimination in more than 170 countries.

Either one or both chemicals were found in 23 of 26 (88%) samples of foam padding from Canada, Hungary, and USA. Half the samples contained components of PentaBDE at levels that exceeded the indicative hazardous waste limit under European Union regulation. For OctaBDE components, 46% of the samples exceeded the limit.

PentaBDE and OctaBDE are released into dust and pose significant hazards for infants and toddlers. People who recycle foam and lay carpet also have been found to have 10 times the amount of these chemicals in their body as other people. According to the Convention expert committee, PentaBDE is linked to reproductive toxicity, neurodevelopmental toxicity and negative effects on thyroid hormones. OctaBDE hazards include delayed neurotoxicity and immunotoxicity.

Both substances are listed in the treaty for global elimination but governments granted an exemption that permits recycling foam and plastics containing them. In the United States PCBs are banned, and there is a voluntary agreement with manufacturers to stop producing PentaBDE and OctaBDE. However, the loophole that permits recycling of materials containing these substances into new consumer products remains.

“Allowing the recycling toxic chemicals such as PentaBDE and OctaBDE into our consumer products is dangerous and threatens the integrity of the Stockholm Convention,” said Dr. Olga Speranskaya, IPEN co-chair. “Our living rooms should not be a hazardous waste dump.”

Governments around the world will decide whether to continue allowing the recycling of materials containing these chemicals at the 5th Conference of the Parties of the Stockholm Convention, 25 – 29 April.

The study is available here: <http://ipen.org/ipenweb/pops/cop5.html>

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IPEN, www.ipen.org , is a global network of more than 700 health and environmental organizations working in 109 countries. IPEN supports local, national, regional and international efforts to protect human health and the environment from harms caused by exposure to all toxic chemicals.