

How toxic were 5 Illinoisans?

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CHICAGO -- While she traveled the world with the Navy, Stephanie Felten said she carefully considered the food and consumer products she bought, figuring other countries did not have the safety regulations she expected in the United States.

Felten said she thought she could relax when she returned home. But testing found Felten's body carries evidence of three types of industrial chemicals used in the United States in everyday products such as shower curtains, cosmetics, canned goods, toys, medical equipment and upholstered furniture.

Felten was one of five Illinoisans, including two state lawmakers, who volunteered to have their blood and urine tested as part of a project that involved 35 participants in seven states.

The process, called biomonitoring, measures the presence of chemicals in body tissues and fluids. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention produces a report every few years assessing the American population's exposure to more than 100 chemicals, although its participants are not identified.

A coalition of public interest groups produced the report released Thursday, called "Is It in Us? Chemical Contamination in Our Bodies."

The project's authors maintain the three types of chemicals they measured for have leached from products into the environment and humans. They say the chemicals have been linked to a variety of health problems in humans and laboratory animals, including reproductive issues, obesity, memory problems and cancer.

"You can't avoid," such products, said Felten, 27, of Aurora, now a college student and mother of a 2-year-old son. "Why are the chemical companies allowed to roll the dice on my health, on my son's health?"

The chemical industry, however, maintains that the chemicals detailed in the report have never been found to be harmful to humans at the levels they have been found in the body.

"The public should not be misled into thinking that the products of chemistry are inherently dangerous just because chemicals can now -- through improvements in analytical chemistry -- be detected at trace levels in people's blood or urine," a statement from the American Chemistry Council said.

"Biomonitoring indicates presence. It doesn't mean there is a significant health risk," the statement said.

Steven Hentges, an executive director at the chemistry council, said while environmental groups like to say that there are safer chemical alternatives available, there is no evidence to show that is indeed so.

"Is it rhetoric or is it reality?" he said.

The other states where volunteers were tested were Alaska, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota and New York.

In Illinois, the project was coordinated by Environment Illinois.

The group's environmental coordinator, Max Muller, said the report demonstrates the need for the United States to adopt a federal policy to raise the standards governing chemical use.

The project found all three types of chemicals in every person tested, although the report's authors stressed the project cannot be considered representative of the general population.

One of the volunteers in Illinois was State Rep. Elaine Nekritz, 49, a Democrat from Northbrook.

In the spring, she sponsored a measure that would have banned flame retardants called PBDEs, which are used in upholstered furniture, automobile components and home electronics. It was approved in committee, but failed in the House.

She also got \$250,000 in funding to start a biomonitoring program for Illinois residents to measure contaminants in human bodies. California is setting up such a program.

But Nekritz's funding fell victim to Gov. Rod Blagojevich's vetoing of \$463 million from the budget lawmakers sent to his desk.

She said she'll continue pushing for both measures and is optimistic "the tide is turning" regarding public awareness of chemicals in human bodies.

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