

FDA regulations put a cap on chemicals used in antibacterial soaps

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Kindergarten teacher Marianna Ginn (right) of Raymond Elementary School demonstrates the recommended use of antibacterial soap to her students (from left) Trey Holman, Jacob McGee and Shelby Bridgers as they wash their hands on September 4, 2009, in Raymond, Mississippi. Photo: AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The federal government Friday banned more than a dozen chemicals used in antibacterial soaps. Manufacturers did not show the ingredients are safe and kill germs, the government said.

"We have no scientific evidence that they are any better than plain soap and water," said Dr. Janet Woodcock in a statement. She is the Food and Drug Administration's, or FDA's, drug center director.

Friday's decision primarily targets two ingredients, triclosan and triclocarban. Both were once used frequently in soaps. There is limited research, but much of it is based on tests on animals. This research suggests that the ingredients can interfere with chemical levels in the body. The ingredient may also allow bacteria to become resistant to drugs. This can make it harder for drugs to fight the bacteria that causes infections or disease.

Some Companies Fail To Provide Information

The 19 banned chemicals have long been questioned. A cleaning industry spokesman said most companies have already removed them from their soaps and washes.

The FDA said it will give companies more time to provide information on three other chemicals that are used in most antibacterial soaps today.

The agency told manufacturers nearly three years ago that they must show their products are safe and effective. Agency workers said Friday that in some cases they did not receive any information from the industry supporting a chemical's use. In other instances, the information did not meet federal standards for proving safety and effectiveness. In the case of triclosan, they said they didn't receive human or animal studies showing the drug is safe or effective.

Maybe Marketing Is Wrong

"Consumers may think antibacterial washes are more effective at preventing the spread of germs," Woodcock said in a statement. In fact, some information suggests that antibacterial ingredients may do more harm than good over time, she said.

Most of the research on triclosan's safety involves laboratory animals. Studies in rats showed changes in testosterone and estrogen hormones as well as thyroid hormones, which control metabolism. Some scientists worry that if it causes such changes in humans it could raise the risk of infertility, early puberty and even cancer — though no connection has been established.

The chemicals are known to kill some bacteria, even if they are no better than soap. Because of this, experts fear that people using the soaps regularly will help allow drug-resistant germs known as superbugs to emerge. These are bugs that cannot be killed by antibiotics.

Dr. Theresa Michele said the risks outweighed the benefits of the chemicals, since manufacturers did not point to any benefits. She leads a division of the FDA.

The FDA ban comes more than 40 years after Congress asked the agency to examine triclosan and dozens of other germ-fighting ingredients. The government agreed to publish its findings only after a three-year legal battle with the Natural Resources Defense Council. The Council, an environmental group, accused the FDA of delaying a decision on the safety of triclosan.

"Consumers have waited a long time for this sensible safeguard," said Mae Wu, a lawyer with the group.

A Peek At Your Pee

Wu and others point to research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A study found triclosan in the urine of 3 out of 4 Americans tested for various chemicals. However, the agency states on its website that many chemicals show up in urine without having any effect.

The FDA is starting a sweeping reexamination of soaps and washes used by consumers and health professionals.

The American Cleaning Institute, a cleaning chemical association, disputed the FDA's findings. The FDA already has information that shows the safety and effectiveness of antibacterial soaps, the institute said in a statement.

The group's spokesman said companies plan to submit information on three chemicals currently used by industry: benzalkonium chloride, benzethonium chloride and chloroxylenol. The FDA delayed making a decision on those chemicals for one year.

The FDA decision does not apply to hand sanitizers. Most of them use alcohol rather than antibacterial chemicals.

Quiz

- 1 Which piece of evidence BEST explains the cause for the government's concern about antibacterial soaps?
- (A) The 19 banned chemicals have long been questioned.
 - (B) Agency workers said Friday that in some cases they did not receive any information from the industry supporting a chemical's use.
 - (C) Studies in rats showed changes in testosterone and estrogen hormones as well as thyroid hormones, which control metabolism.
 - (D) The chemicals are known to kill some bacteria, even if they are no better than soap.
- 2 Which paragraph in the section "A Peek At Your Pee" explains how the FDA is beginning a larger investigation of soaps?
- 3 Which two of the following sentences from the article include MAIN ideas of the article?
1. *The federal government Friday banned more than a dozen chemicals used in antibacterial soaps.*
 2. *A cleaning industry spokesman said most companies have already removed them from their soaps and washes.*
 3. *In fact, some information suggests that antibacterial ingredients may do more harm than good over time, she said.*
 4. *The FDA delayed making a decision on those chemicals for one year.*
- (A) 1 and 2
 - (B) 1 and 3
 - (C) 2 and 4
 - (D) 3 and 4
- 4 How does the section "Maybe Marketing Is Wrong" support a central idea of the article?
- (A) It details the response of the soap companies to the ban of the chemicals they use.
 - (B) It explains the scientific reasons the FDA has for banning the chemicals used in soaps.
 - (C) It demonstrates that Congress asked the FDA to study chemicals in soaps a long time ago.
 - (D) It suggests that the government did not know enough about the chemicals before now.

