

# **Formaldehyde: Who Keeps the Laws From Keeping Up With the Science?**

Formaldehyde is that smell you may remember from the tubs of preserved specimens in the high school biology lab. Formaldehyde is also used to make chemicals and resins and as an adhesive in plywood and particle board.

## **Formaldehyde is dangerous, yet unregulated in the United States.**

Formaldehyde is one of the 62,000 chemicals that were grandfathered in when the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) became law with no requirement that it be tested and shown to be safe. Since 1976, new science has shown that formaldehyde can cause cancer, asthma attacks, and other breathing problems. It is also suspected of harming the nervous and immune systems.

## **Europe, Japan, and China restrict formaldehyde levels in consumer goods, but the U.S. does not.**

Because of formaldehyde's health impacts, China makes a low formaldehyde plywood for domestic use and to export to the European Union and Japan. But China makes plywood with high levels of formaldehyde for export to the United States.

## **After people in the U.S. were sickened by formaldehyde exposure, the U.S. EPA was petitioned to regulate formaldehyde. The petition was denied.**

Plywood with high levels of formaldehyde was used in the trailers that FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, supplied to Hurricane Katrina survivors and to the emergency workers cleaning up the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After Katrina survivors started getting sick from the formaldehyde fumes, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was petitioned to regulate this use of formaldehyde.



EPA denied the petition because the agency said it doesn't have sufficient legal authority to take action against formaldehyde under TSCA.

**Many people in the U.S. are exposed to dangerously high levels of formaldehyde daily.** The problems with formaldehyde aren't limited to FEMA trailers. Many building materials and other consumer products used in the United States have dangerous levels of formaldehyde. An Arizona study designed to be representative of the general U.S. population found that the air in 25% of homes had dangerous levels of formaldehyde.

**So who is keeping our laws from keeping up with the science?** The EPA has been trying to update its formaldehyde assessment since 1998, but the [agency's efforts have been repeatedly stalled](#) by the formaldehyde industry and its allies in Congress. Pro-formaldehyde lobby groups "[downplay](#)" the dangers of formaldehyde and donate to politicians who further delay government regulation.

Since 1998, the Formaldehyde Council – which has "[very strong ties](#)" to Koch Industries – has disputed the scientific evidence that formaldehyde causes cancer. Meanwhile, Congressmen financially [connected](#) to the Formaldehyde Council and Koch Industries – notably Senators Inhofe (R-OK) and Vitter (R-LA) – have challenged and [slowed the government's review](#) of formaldehyde for as long as possible.

## **Formaldehyde in the news:**

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### **Formaldehyde Causes Cancer**

In June 2011, "government scientists listed formaldehyde as a carcinogen, and said it is found in worrisome quantities in plywood, particle board, mortuaries and hair salons."

"Frequent and intense exposures in manufacturing plants are far more worrisome than the intermittent contact that most consumers have, but government scientists said that consumers should still avoid contact with formaldehyde."

Dr. Otis Brawley, chief medical officer at the American Cancer Society, said that formaldehyde is both worrisome and inescapable. "It's the smell in new houses, and it's in cosmetics like nail polish," he said. "All a reasonable person can do is manage their exposure and decrease it to as little as possible. It's everywhere."

The release of the government's Report on Carcinogens "was delayed for years because of intense lobbying from the chemical industry."

Source: *The New York Times*,  
June 10, 2011.

### **Clothes, Household Goods Treated with Formaldehyde**

"Though it is not obvious from the label, the antiwrinkle finish comes from a resin that releases formaldehyde, the chemical that is usually associated with embalming fluids or dissected frogs in biology class.

"And clothing is not the only thing treated with the chemical. Formaldehyde is commonly found in a broad range of consumer products and can show up in practically every room of the house. The sheets and pillow cases on the bed. The drapes hanging in the living room. The upholstery on the couch. In the bathroom, it can be found in personal care products like shampoos, lotions and eye shadow. It may even be in the baseball cap hanging by the back door.

“The United States does not regulate formaldehyde levels in clothing, most of which is now made overseas. Nor does any government agency require manufacturers to disclose the use of the chemical on labels.”

Source: *The New York Times*, December 10, 2012.

### **Banned Trailers Return for Latest Gulf Disaster**

The same FEMA issued trailers that were provided to people who lost their homes during Hurricane Katrina – which “were discovered to have such high levels of formaldehyde that the government banned them from ever being used for long-term housing again” – made a comeback as housing for workers cleaning up the BP oil spill.

“Within months, some of these residents began complaining about breathing problems and burning eyes, noses and throats. One man who had complained about fumes was found dead in his trailer in June 2006.

“Federal officials later discovered that formaldehyde – an industrial chemical that can cause nasal cancer, aggravates respiratory problems and may be linked to leukemia – was present in many of these housing units in amounts that exceeded federal limits.”

Source: *The New York Times*, June 30, 2012.