

Is silicone cookware safe?

Written by EarthTalk® From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine
Monday, 15 March 2010 13:27



Dear EarthTalk: Are there any health hazards associated with the use of the new silicone bake ware and cooking utensils? I have found information associated with the hazards/benefits of Teflon and other cookware but nothing on the use of silicone. -- Jean McCarthy, Sebastian, FL

With all the negative press about Teflon and about metals leaching out of pots and pans, consumers are on the lookout for cookware that's easy-to-clean and doesn't pose health concerns. Silicone, a synthetic rubber made of bonded silicon (a natural element abundant in sand and rock) and oxygen, is increasingly filling this niche. The flexible yet strong material, which has proven popular in muffin pans, cupcake liners, spatulas and other utensils, can go from freezer to oven (up to 428 degrees Fahrenheit), is non-stick and stain-resistant, and unlike conventional cookware, comes in a range of bright and cheery colors.

But some wonder if there is dark side to silicone cookware. Anecdotal reports of dyes or silicone oil oozing out of overheated silicone cookware pop up on Internet posts, as do reports of odors lingering after repeated washings. Also, silicone's image may be forever tainted by problems associated with silicone gel breast implants—some women with earlier generations of these implants experienced capsular contracture, an abnormal immune system response to foreign materials. And while theories about silicone implants' link to breast cancer have since been debunked, the damage to silicone's reputation lives on.

It's sad to say, but since the use of silicone in cookware is fairly new, there has not been much research into its safety for use with food. Back in 1979 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) determined that silicon dioxides—the basic elements in silicone cookware—were generally recognized as safe to use even in food-grade contexts. But the first silicone cookware (silicone spatulas) didn't start to show up on store shelves until a decade later, and the FDA hasn't conducted any follow-up studies to determine whether silicone can leach out of cookware and potentially contaminate food. For its part, Canada's health agency, Health Canada, maintains that food-grade silicone does not react with food or beverages or produce any hazardous fumes, and as such is safe to use up to recommended temperatures.

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Consumer advocate Debra Lynn Dadd, who steers clear of Teflon due to health concerns, is bullish on silicone cookware after investigating potential toxicity. “I tried to find some information on the health effects of silicone rubber, but it was not listed in any of the toxic chemical databases I use,” she reports, adding that she also sampled material safety data on several silicone rubbers manufactured by Dow Corning (which makes some 700 variations). “All descriptions I read of silicone rubber describe it as chemically inert and stable, so it is unlikely to react with or leach into food, nor outgas vapors.” She adds that silicone “is not toxic to aquatic or soil organisms, it is not hazardous waste, and while it is not biodegradable, it can be recycled after a lifetime of use.”

So while most of us will probably not have a problem with silicone cookware, those with chemical sensitivities might want to stay away until more definitive research has been conducted. In the meantime, cast iron and anodized aluminum cookware remain top choices for those concerned about harmful elements leaching into their cooked foods.

CONTACTS: FDA, www.fda.gov ; Health Canada, www.hc-sc.gc.ca ; Debra Lynn Dadd, www.dld123.com
; Dow Corning,
www.dowcorning.com

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