

Popular light bulbs have safety issues

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LOUISVILLE, KY (WAVE) - Going green - it's supposed to be a positive step that helps save money and the environment. But how safe are the popular new fluorescent light bulbs and are they really environmentally friendly?

The new bulbs outlast the traditional ones 10-to-1, but they also contain mercury. Even so, a lot of people are using them, and some are unaware of the potential danger mercury can pose.

To environmentally and budget conscious Louisville Moms like Maureen Womack, seeing the light means saving money and a substantial amount of energy by switching to the new compact florescent bulbs - or CFLs.

"We decided we were going to go as green as we possibly could go," said Maureen Womack. "I read a lot about how compact fluorescent saves so much energy, so we put them all throughout our house."

Womack did notice that the bulbs contain mercury. "Nothing in our house has broken yet, but I worry when that happens," she said of the CFL bulbs.

Womack was shocked when we told her about the federal guidelines to follow if a CFL bulb does break. The EPA directions begin like this: "Have all people and pets leave the room."

Texas Congressman Ted Poe recently took issue with the bulbs, and read from the guidelines himself to illustrate his point. "Open the window and leave the room for 15 minutes or more, shut off the central heating and air conditioning system."

The clean-up warnings continue: "Do not use a broom or a vacuum; instead find cardboard or stiff paper to sweep up the bulb and duct tape to pick up the mercury fragments. And carefully place them in a glass jar with a metal lid that's readily available."

The reason for the precautions: mercury is a neurotoxin that can cause neurological problems if it reaches the developing brain of a young child or a fetus.

Poe also pointed out to other lawmakers that every CFL bulb now sold in America is made in China. "Over the last year, we've seen Chinese pet food kill our dogs and

cats, Chinese lead paint is poison to our children, and now Chinese light bulbs that contain mercury can be harmful to our health."

Meanwhile, Womack realizes it's a tiny amount of mercury in each bulb and her home and children should be safe if all precautions are followed. However, she worries that not everyone will follow the EPA's instructions for cleaning up broken bulbs. "What concerns me is that people don't know how to dispose of them correctly."

UofL Hazardous Materials expert Dennis Sullivan agrees, saying most people simply throw the bulbs away. "I don't think most people are aware (of the risk)," he said. "They look at the light bulb as a convenience and it's safe and it wouldn't be sold in a supermarket if it wasn't safe."

Although many big businesses in Louisville recycle their bulbs, Sullivan says the majority of people throw them away, which could eventually be a problem at our nation's landfills, allowing mercury to seep into ground and surface water.

The broken bulbs would join many other household products like bleach that also contain mercury.

UofL recycles about 15,000 bulbs a year for 40 to 90 cents each.

"It's a cost to us to recycle those bulbs," Sullivan said. "On the other hand, we're preventing a lot of mercury from entering the environment by recycling those bulbs."

Even if we all try to be a good citizens, it's not always easy. The metro's "Haz-Bin" on Grade Lane is locked up most days, with the only drop-off times for florescent bulbs coming on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

City officials say they are working on a plan to allow more convenient recycling of the bulbs