

Is Your Mattress Making You Sick?

By Cheryl Thomas CBN News July 2, 2007

Many people who suffer with headaches, joint aches, and other physical ills on a daily basis reach for over-the-counter remedies to quell their pain.

Few, if any, would ever suspect their mattress is the cause of their problems.

While it's well-known that an older mattress can be a source of allergies -- mostly from dust mites or mold -- a new mattress would be worry-free.

Or would it?

There's Something Scary in My Bed

Some 30 or more years ago, mattresses were made of untreated, natural materials, but now most come to the store bearing a host of petrochemicals, flame retardants and other additives.

The Consumer Products Safety Commission lists the following chemicals as the primary ones used in mattresses to meet current laws: boric acid, formaldehyde, antimony trioxide, decabromodiphenyl oxide, vinylidene chloride, zinc borate, and melamine.

Most people have trouble believing that the mattress industry and the government have put poisonous chemicals in our mattresses to make them fireproof, and think they must use a different chemical. No, according to experts, the chemical used is exactly the same as the pesticide. Check the mattress law tag; if it says 'Treated Cotton,' it is likely boron/boric acid.

The initial reason for adding fire retardants to mattresses was commendable -- fire marshals reported that more individuals died or were injured from mattresses or upholstered furniture catching fire than from any other type of fire.

But we're now finding -- from growing reports of illnesses seemingly linked to mattress purchases -- that this solution may also have its serious drawbacks.

Many doctors had initially opposed the move to add chemicals to mattresses, fearing such potential adverse effects. But the law was enacted, nonetheless.

And as of July 1 of this year, more bad news. The Web site PrescriptionBeds.com warns that new federal regulations require yet more fire retardant material in mattresses, hence more potentially allergic material for the sensitive sleeper to contend with.

A foam rubber company we spoke with suggests that consumers who are chemically sensitive should check the mattress tag before they buy. If the label says that the mattress conforms to the July 1, 2007 fire retardant regulations, then those mattresses will have a heavier load of chemicals than those manufactured prior to the July 1 date.

You still can find mattresses that were manufactured prior to the July 1 date, so ask around if you are concerned, or talk to a bedding company for more details.

Fortunately, there is at least one good method to reduce mattress combustibility without adding harmful chemicals.

According to one organic mattress Web site, manufacturers can add a layer of wool to either side of an untreated cotton mattress. This serves as an effective fire barrier -- no chemicals needed.

But there is another potential group of troublemakers in your mattress that you should be aware of -- and that is pesticide residue.

Cotton is said to be the worst offender, because it is the most heavily sprayed crop.

According to CasanaturalInc.com, "Twenty-five percent of all the agricultural chemicals are used to grow cotton."

However, some experts claim that the cotton retains little pesticide residue after going through the manufacturing process.

According to Ousmane Boye, an official at Senegal's Ministry for Agriculture, some of the chemical insecticides and fertilizers imported to Senegal from Europe and the U.S. last year are restricted or banned in their country of origin.

There are 107 active ingredients in pesticides still used in the U.S. that are carcinogenic, and 14 are known to cause reproductive problems in animals, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

And organo-phosphates are one pesticide type known to have serious, long-term effects on human health.

But pesticide residues may not be limited to your mattress. Sheets and bedtoppers -- made from various man-made and natural components -- can also be laden with it. And the residue of this "chemical stew" is being breathed in nightly by countless numbers of unsuspecting sleepers.

Restless Nights

For those with impaired immune systems -- a problem more and more common -- there can be serious health ramifications.

Symptoms may range from a common headache or joint ache, to unexplained rashes, eczema, nosebleeds, dizziness -- even severe migraines, arthritis, ringing in the ears, nausea and more.

Well, all this might make you run out and buy a "hypoallergenic" mattress.

But wait a minute -- a so-called hypoallergenic mattress may not solve your allergy problems -- it could make them worse.

One website that tracks mattress complaints from purchasers said that many hypoallergenic mattresses actually trigger problems -- and in many who never considered themselves "the allergic type."

One South Dakota family reported the following after they bought a memory foam mattress pad and

pillows from a popular discount store: "We went through problems for seven months. It started with minor problems and got worse - hives, kidneys hurting, swollen lips, flu feelings, cough, sore joints, etc. My wife was going to the doctor in an attempt to figure it out. We never suspected the pad and pillows. I finally ran across a website while considering what type of new bed to buy, in an attempt to resolve our problems. We removed the two memory foam pillows and the memory foam mattress pad, and within two days all problems were gone. Two months later, all is well."

And a Florida couple reported this: "Out-gassing from our new adjustable air mattress gave me false symptoms of a heart attack. It came on gradually over a couple of days. (After going to the hospital) I felt better -- until I came home. Moving the bed outside finally did the trick (all symptoms gone). I had also been depressed for a few days (very unusual for me), but the depression lifted within 24 hours of moving the mattress outside."

And from Pennsylvania: "We bought our new mattress some nine months ago. We heard this type was very good. (But) the past few months my wife has been to numerous doctors for rashes, lumps and other problems. Her autoimmune system seems to be affected. She is now scheduled for a biopsy. We thought about what has changed in our lives, and the only difference is the mattress. It cost \$2200, but it isn't worth her health. Maybe it's time to take it back, or just get rid of it."

Getting Those *Zzzzzzz*'s

But while a mattress allergy may be annoying and problematic, there are solutions that work.

Buying another type of bedding could resolve the problem, if your allergies are limited to just a few suspect materials.

Or you could try a hemp mattress. Fewer pesticides are used to grow hemp than cotton and other bedding materials, so it tends to pose fewer problems for allergy sufferers.

Or you could go organic. More and more stores, many online, offer organic mattresses and bedding. Their products are guaranteed to be made of chemical-free, organically grown materials.

Some of the websites that offer these include: TheNaturalBedStore.com, LifeKind.com, and OrganicMattresses.com.

You'll need to do some research to find out which type may be right for you. Be sure to ask all your questions up front, before a purchase is made. Most mattresses and bedding have a no return/refund policy, so be sure you know the store's policies before you buy.

Another route -- if buying another mattress hasn't solved your allergy problems, and because buying more than one new mattress can get very expensive (!) -- is to schedule some allergy testing for dust mites and some of the more common chemicals and pesticides. [*Another alternative to expensive new mattresses is to wrap your mattresses with a No-Chem Mattress Cover*].

And here is some advice from ChemTox.com, an information-sharing website for health disorders from chemicals and pesticide exposure: "While many environmental factors can contribute to adverse health problems when sleeping, the first step to determining if the bed or sheets are the cause... simply sleep somewhere else - couch, etc. - This trial-and-error analysis, when repeated several times, will clearly demonstrate if the bed, detergents or bedroom is the problem."

The most important thing to remember is -- don't get discouraged. If you can't solve the problem on your first attempt, keep trying.

A process of elimination will likely solve the problem, and you'll be back getting a good night's sleep, once again.

Sources: ChemTox.com, Nirvana Safe Haven, New Internationalist, raworganic.com, casanaturainc.com, People For Clean Beds.org, PrescriptionBeds.com