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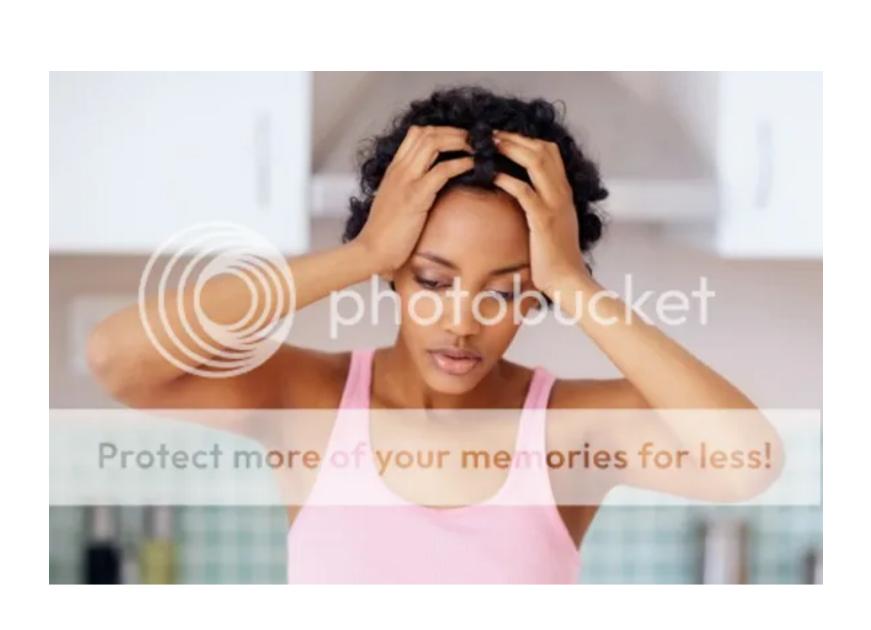
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## **Are Plastic Products** Costing You Your Sex Drive?

Julie Gunlock | October 22, 2014





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Are plastics causing women to lose their sex drive? The Guardian warns, "How household plastics could ruin your sex life." The Telegraph's headline suggests, "Rubber ducks can kill your sex drive, research finds." Cosmopolitan Magazine wonders "Are Chemicals in Plastic Reducing Your Sex Drive?" while the Daily Mail declares that it's all down to those pesky modern products:

Chemicals found in PVC flooring, plastic shower curtains, processed food and other trappings of modern life may be sapping women's interest in sex.

A study has linked low libido with the additives used to soften plastics which are found in every home. Women with the highest levels of phthalates in their bodies were more than twice as likely to say 'not tonight dear' as those with the lowest amounts.

Okay, so let's take a look at this "research."

The Daily mail gives this tidy summary:

In the first study of its kind, Dr. Emily Barrett, of the University of Rochester School of Medicine in the US, measured levels of phthalates in the of 360 pregnant women in their 20s and 30s.

She also asked them how often they lost interest in sex in the months leading up to their pregnancy.

Those with the most phthalates in their bodies were two and a half times as likely to say they had frequently lacked interest in sex as those with the least.

Alrighty, does anyone hear any alarm bells going off?

First, the study only included single urine samples of a small number of women—specifically 360 women. This is not a large number. It's not off the wall bad (I've seen studies on 10 women make headlines), but it's not a huge, years-long toxicological examination of pregnant women and chemical exposure. Second, the study hasn't been published yet. That alone makes these headlines ridiculous because publication is the first step in the peer review process. In other words, this study is very preliminary; it has not yet been tested or reviewed by other scientists. Lastly, it appears (again, I haven't been able to look at the actual study, the methodology or the results so I'm guessing based on the news reports) that these women weren't examined throughout their pregnancy but just once —a single urine sample. This and many other things make this study a case of correlation, not causation.

So yes, the women that had higher levels of phthalates had a lower sex drive but notice that we really have no idea if these women actually had measurably high levels of the chemicals. We are only told that one set of women had higher levels than the other set of women. Again, we have no evidence (and there remain zero studies) that prove phthalates have anything to do with a lower sex drive.

In other words, the researcher in no way demonstrated that phthalates were the reason for this low sex drive.

Also, the chemical was measured in the urine—that means the trace level of chemical in these womens' bodies was exiting the body through their urine. A more accurate measure of phthalates residue would be to use blood tests (although again, detection of these trace chemicals in the blood does not mean it is at a high enough level to cause harm).

There are literally millions of things that might account for a lower sex drive. For instance, these scientists might just have easily asked them questions bout their eating habits and found a coloration between pizza consumption and sex drive. Perhaps the women with low sex drive had more difficult pregnancies. Maybe they ate carbs more regularly or drank decaf coffee. Maybe they had more stress or maybe women with lower sex drives wore fuzzy socks more than the other women.

The point is you can make any sort of correlation you want. It really means nothing in terms of scientific discovery.

Yet, none of the newspapers covering this issue made that point. In fact, the Guardian's piece on this issue—written by feature writer Paula Cocozza who has an MA in creative writing at the University of East Anglia (a university well known to support junk science) quotes a BBC news story which cited a widely debunked study by my favorite activist in a lab coat Shanna Swan (I've written about Swan's make believe studies here and here). Forbes contributor Trevor Butterworth has also written about Swan's studies, saying:

Swan claimed that levels of certain phthalate metabolites in pregnant women correlated with a lower anogenital index in their male children (the AGI is a measurement of the distance from the anus to the base of the penis, divided by the weight at the time of measurement)

There wasn't a consensus as to what a normal range for AGI was in baby boys or whether it is significant, but there was evidence that a shorter AGI correlated with a slower rate of testicular descent in animals. When a National Institutes of Health expert panel later evaluated her study, it didn't find her evidence wholly convincing. All

the babies in the study had normal genitalia with no sign of defects.

One would expect a Guardian writer to do the basic research on Swan and other "researchers" she quotes for her pieces. But why would Cocozza do that when Swan's fiction supports her alarmist headline and leads to more clicks from nervous pregnant women. It's a win-win for The Guardian. Journalism be damned!

Back to the study.

There's another thing mothers might understand about this study. During pregnancy, very often women aren't all that interested in sex. You feel huge, and swollen and worn out and you've developed cankles and everything feels tight and well, you have a kid growing in your belly and who the heck wants to get naked. Of course, this isn't true of everyone. Some have raging hormones that work in the opposite way but for the most part, I know a reduced libido is sort of the norm when your carrying a 8 pound watermelon around all day.

Lastly, while this study says it's the plastics you surround yourself with all day, what are we supposed to do with this competing study that says its house cleaning and fast food that's affecting your sex drive. Goodness, so many things we can't do when pregnant. Clean our houses, eat fast food, drive (that dashboard is chuck full of plastics), cook (is that spatula made of plastic?), get takeout (my food container is made of plastic), take a shower (shower curtains are plastic!), walk around my house (I must now replace all the PVC flooring in my house. Awesome). Wow, as if pregnancy wasn't hard enough.

I have better advice: Take note that correlation is an awesome tool used by unethical scientists searching for more funding. It's a clever way to find whatever "results" one wishes to find, without having to prove a thing.

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