

## FAQs

### **Why has upholstered furniture been treated with flame retardants?**

A California furniture flammability standard called Technical Bulletin 117 (TB117) led to the use of harmful and ineffective flame retardant chemicals in upholstered furniture and baby product foam across the US and Canada from 1975 to the present.

This standard only tests product filling material and does not address the fabric covering where fires start, nor does it address the leading cause of furniture fires: cigarettes. TB117 has been updated and is being replaced by TB117-2013, which stops cigarette fires where they start, on the fabric. The new standard provides increased fire safety without the use of flame retardants.

### **How can I buy furniture without flame retardants?**

Manufacturers can begin to make flame retardant-free furniture under the new regulation, TB117-2013, beginning January 2014. Although the new standard can be met without flame retardants, it does NOT ban their use. Look for the TB117-2013 label on products, and then verify with your retailer or manufacturer that products do not contain flame retardants.

You can also avoid products that contain polyurethane foam. Down, wool, and polyester fillings usually do not contain flame retardants. Wooden and wicker furniture without any filling also does not contain flame retardants. You can learn more on our [Consumer Resources page](#) or in our [Safe Kids handout](#).

Download our handout, [Furniture Without Added Flame Retardants](#), which lists some options for buying flame retardant free furniture and read more about this issue on the New York Times blog, ["What to Do About That Couch?"](#)

### **What are the health concerns associated with flame retardants in furniture?**

Flame retardant chemicals have been associated with a host of human health concerns, including lower birth weight, reduced IQ (similar to lead poisoning), hyperactivity, poorer coordination, reduced fertility, birth defects, hormonal changes, and cancer.

### **Is there scientific research to back up the information about health problems?**

To date, there have been over 4,000 studies on PBDEs alone and the literature continues to grow. The Green Science Policy Institute compiled a bibliography with hundreds of references regarding the negative health impacts of flame retardants used in furniture which is [available here](#).

### **How do I know if my old couch or other furniture contains flame retardants?**

If your furniture contains polyurethane foam and has a label stating that it meets California Technical Bulletin 117 (TB117), then it almost certainly does contain flame retardant chemicals. Unfortunately, even if furniture does not have a TB117 label, if it contains polyurethane foam, it could still contain flame retardants. In our study of

100 couches, all but one of the couches purchased in California and 81% of couches purchased in other states contained flame retardants.

Since there are no laws that require manufacturers to provide this information to consumers, the only way to know for sure is to test the foam by analytical chemistry methods.

### **Can I get my product with foam tested?**

Testing for all types of flame retardants is not readily available to consumers as far as we know.

### **What can I do to reduce my family's exposure to flame retardants?**

The best way to reduce exposure to flame retardants is to remove products containing them from your indoor environments.

The next best strategy is to keep household dust levels down. Most exposure to flame retardants occurs after the chemicals migrate out of a product's foam and settle into household dust, which then enter our bodies by hand-to-mouth contact. Vacuuming frequently with a HEPA filter, wet mopping, and dusting with a damp cloth can reduce household dust. Finally, washing your and your children's hands frequently, and always before eating, can help reduce ingestion of dust containing flame retardants. Visit our [Consumer Resources page](#) to learn more.

### **Do slipcovers help prevent flame retardants from leaving the foam?**

Unfortunately, slipcovers offer no protection from potentially harmful flame retardants--the chemicals are not bound to the foam and can easily travel through a slipcover. The chemicals are constantly dispersing into the air, then settling in dust. Exposure comes primarily from ingesting contaminated dust.

### **Is my mattress treated with flame retardants?**

If your mattress was made after 2007, it is unlikely that the foam inside contains flame retardants. According to the mattress industry, flame retardants are not used in foam in adult mattresses in the U.S. The federal mattress standard, called 16 CFR 1633, requires that the finished mattress meet a very severe and lengthy open flame ignition test. To meet this requirement, barrier materials such as fire-resistant fiber batting or boric acid treated cotton fiber are wrapped around the mattress foam, which do not present the same concerns as flame retardants.

If your mattress was made before 2007, it may contain flame retardant chemicals in the foam. It is not a bad idea to consider replacing these older mattresses as your budget allows.

### **Is my child's mattress treated with flame retardants?**

Baby mattresses with a TB117 label are likely to contain flame retardant chemicals and should be avoided. Mattresses produced after January 1, 2014 without a TB117 label are less likely to contain the chemicals, but it is prudent to verify with the

retailer to make sure. [A report](#) on crib/ infant mattresses from Clean & Healthy New York provides information on some manufacturers.

### **What other children's products contain flame retardants?**

[We tested 101 foam samples](#) from baby products including nursing pillows, nap mats, and sleep positioners, and found that over 80% contained flame retardants at levels up to 12 percent of the weight of the foam.

### **Is my carpet or carpet cushion treated with flame retardants?**

Carpets are not usually treated with flame retardants as there is no standard that we are aware of that would require carpets to contain these chemicals. However, bonded polyurethane carpet cushion, which is over 85% of carpet cushion currently produced in the United States, usually contains flame retardants. This cushion is made from the same flame retardant foam that is used in furniture. One solution to avoid flame retardants is to use a natural wool, natural rubber, fiber or felt pad under carpeting rather than bonded foam carpet cushion.

### **Do children's pajamas/ clothing contain flame retardants?**

Toxic "Tris" flame retardants were removed from children's pajamas in the 1970s, and it is unlikely that other halogenated flame retardants are used in pajamas.

Sleepwear for children under 9 months of age and pajamas that are tight fitting for any age should not contain added flame retardants. Look for a tag that says, "For child's safety, garment should fit snugly. This garment is not flame resistant. Loose fitting garment is more likely to catch fire," or similar language. This means that the fabric used to make the garment was probably not treated with flame retardants.

Some cotton pajamas may be treated, often with the phosphate chemical tetrakis hydromethyl phosphonium chloride (THPC or Proban aka Securest).

### **Where can I find out more about flame retardant chemicals?**

A good place to start is our [Chemicals of Concern](#) page.