What Exactly Does A BPA-Free Label Mean?

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You've probably seen labels on many products in retail stores stating that a product is "BPA-free." But what exactly does that label mean? Probably not what you may think it means.

All that a BPA-free label can mean is that the product does not contain BPA. Perhaps it never contained BPA in the first place. What the label doesn't tell you is what chemical the product does contain and whether that chemical is safer than BPA.

Although missing from the label, that's critical information to know. A BPA-free label may be factual, but it isn't necessarily complete or helpful. The safety of a product depends on what the product contains, not what it doesn't contain.

This discrepancy between what consumers think a BPA-free label means and what important information is missing was highlighted in a recent study published by researchers in Northern Ireland. The study was conducted on volunteers who were distributed among six focus groups.

The participants were generally familiar with BPA, at least partly because they had seen or used BPA-free products in the past. They further believed that the BPA-free label means that BPA must be "bad" in some way.

What the participants didn't know is what was used instead of BPA, and were shocked to find out that BPA-free products are not necessarily safer. For example, one of the participants compared BPA-free labelling practices to the removal of salt from food where salt by a different name is used instead:

"*They're telling you it's BPA-free, but they're not telling you its replacements. It's like people taking salt out of things, but they put in mono sodium*."

Although the participants perceived that BPA is "bad" in some way, they also didn't know that BPA is one of the most tested substances in commerce, and the test data strongly supports the safe use of BPA. For example, not long ago the U.S. National Toxicology Program announced the results of the largest study ever conducted on BPA, known as the CLARITY Core study.

The results demonstrate that BPA has very little potential to harm us even when we're exposed to it throughout our lives. In a statement issued at the time the results were released, Dr. Stephen Ostroff, Deputy Commissioner for Foods and Veterinary Medicine at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), stated "*our initial review supports our determination that currently authorized uses of BPA continue to be safe for consumers*."

The FDA website clearly addresses the safety of BPA with the question "Is BPA safe?" and the unambiguous answer "Yes." The answer is based on sound scientific reasons and is shared by respected government agencies around the world.

But the question still remains. If a product labelled as BPA-doesn't contain BPA, what does it contain and how do you know it is safe?