BPA-Free Does Not Mean Chemical-Free (Or Safe)

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If you pay attention to labels on food and beverage containers, you've probably seen quite a few labels indicating that a product is BPA-Free. But what does that mean and why is it there?

The proliferation of BPA-Free labels is an indication that some product manufacturers have decided to replace materials made from BPA, or simply to avoid them in the first place. In that regard, the purpose of a BPA-Free label might be more about sales and marketing rather than consumer transparency. The manufacturer may be trying to make you think that the product is somehow better without BPA.

But if BPA is replaced, it must be replaced with something, which most likely will be another chemical. How do you know that the replacement actually is better than what it replaced? A recent media article describes an interesting case study that illustrates why you can't simply assume that a replacement is better.

For more than 50 years epoxy resins, which are made from BPA, have been used as the protective lining inside many food and beverage cans. The lining is used to prevent corrosion of the metal can and contamination of the contents. Epoxy resins excel in this application but, because they may contain trace levels of residual BPA, many manufacturers are now using other chemicals for can linings.

As reported in the recent media article, a winery in Arizona recently had to pull a new canned sparkling wine product from store shelves because of a "foul odor that emanates when the can is opened." The odor was described as a "sharp mix of sulfur and rubber" with "the sharp pungency of a rotten egg" that comes from the can lining.

The article goes on to note that the winery was using cans with a new type of lining in order to avoid BPA. Given much of the false and inflammatory news coverage that consumers hear about BPA, it is understandable that product manufacturers may want to replace BPA-based can linings. But, as this case study makes clear, BPA doesn't just disappear, it was replaced with another chemical. If we can smell it (or taste it), regardless of whether it has a foul or pleasant odor, we can be sure that a chemical is present.

Just because it is different, how do we know it's better, or even safe? In general we have no way to know since BPA-Free labels only tell us what the product **does not contain** (i.e., does not contain BPA) but **not what it actually does contain.** The label may be factual, but not necessarily complete or helpful. It may very well just be marketing.

All of this is rather ironic in light of the recent announcement from the U.S. National Toxicology Program (NTP) on the results of the CLARITY Core Study, which is the largest study ever conducted on BPA. The results demonstrate that BPA has very little potential to harm us even when we're exposed to it throughout our lives. As noted in a statement from Dr. Stephen Ostroff, Deputy Commissioner for Foods and Veterinary Medicine at the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), "*our initial review supports our determination that currently authorized uses of BPA continue to be safe for consumer.*"

In the case of canned products, manufacturers are replacing epoxy resin protective coatings, which have a 50-year track record of high performance, because they contain traces of BPA, which has been shown to be safe. Even if there are no foul odors involved, given that FDA says BPA is safe, avoiding BPA doesn't seem to make a lot of sense.