Chemical banned in '70s from kids' pajamas resurfaces in couches

(CBS News) If you’ve bought a sofa in the past seven years, there are serious questions about how safe it is. A Duke University study released Wednesday focuses on flame retardant chemicals that are used in 80 percent of those couches. Researchers suspect these chemicals could affect your health.

The survey tested more than 100 couches made between 1998 and 2010. It is the first research conducted on sofas made after 2005 -- the year a previous flame retardant chemical was banned due to health concerns. There's only one problem: the study found the main chemical now used -- Chlorinated Tris or TDCPP -- is harmful as well.

Julie Herbstman, an environmental studies professor at Columbia University, said of the chemical, "It's listed as a possible carcinogen, which basically means that animals that have been exposed have grown tumors. It's been shown in most recent studies to affect sperm quality." She says the public should be concerned because TDCPP was banned in the 1970s from children’s pajamas. Herbstman said, "When children wore these pajamas that were treated with TDCPP, they absorbed it through their skin, and they excreted mutagens. And so this is the chemical that was then taken out of babies pajamas, and we sort of forgot about it for a while."

So now, she says, the sofa they lay on is exposing them to carcinogens.

But why would manufacturers use a chemical that was banned from kids' clothing 30 years ago?

Anne Kolton, of the American Chemistry Council, a trade association that represents flame retardant chemical makers, told CBS News, "TDCPP was removed from children's pajamas by industry voluntarily in response to consumer concern and consumer demand and in abundance of caution. There was no regulatory finding or scientific finding related to TDCPP."

Kolton says the public has nothing to worry about. "First the public should know TDCPP is in upholstered furniture and other products in their home because it slows the spread of fire, and in fire every second counts," she said. "Second, they should know that TDCPP and other flame retardants, have been reviewed by regulators and found to be safe at the levels people are typically exposed to them."

Which begs the question, are we at more risk of dying from a couch fire or from the flame retardant?

Herbstman said, "My sense from what I read about couch fires, is that they don't occur very often. So, am I personally more concerned about dying in a couch fire or cancer? I am more concerned about cancer."

The National Fire Protection Association says about 500 people die every year from fires linked to upholstered furniture.

© 2012 CBS Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved.