

EARTH TALK™

Questions & Answers
About Our Environment

Dear EarthTalk: Just when I finally purged my kitchen of non-stick cookware due to the risks posed by Teflon, I now learn that my rain jacket and waterproof boots are also putting my health at risk from exposure to similar “hydrophobic” chemicals. What’s a concerned outdoors person to do about staying dry and comfortable on a rainy hike?

– Alex Walker, Philadelphia, PA

Many of us remember when Gore-Tex first appeared and revolutionized outdoor clothing and gear by infusing products with a waterproof treatment that could also “breathe” so we wouldn’t get clammy on the inside as our outerwear repelled the elements.

Since then, this synthetic chemical-based weatherproofing has become ubiquitous throughout the outdoor industry, not only in jackets, but also in boots and shoes, backpacks, tents, swimsuits and just about everything else that gets exposed to the wet and wild.

And while we’ve all been happily making our way through the rain and snow, we might not have realized that there is a dark underbelly to all of this weatherproof outdoor gear: perfluorinated compounds.

These synthetic chemicals are related to the “hydrophobic” formulations that make non-stick cookware easy to clean by encouraging liquids to bead up and roll away.

And like their chemical cousins

on cookware, the perfluorinated compounds in your jacket could be making you sick and polluting the environment.

“PFCs are environmentally hazardous substances, which are persistent in the environment,” reports Greenpeace, which launched its Detox Outdoor campaign in 2012 to convince outdoor gear makers to stop using toxic chemicals in their products.

“Studies show that some PFCs can accumulate in living organisms such as the livers of polar bears in the Arctic and are also detected in human blood.”

Meanwhile, animal studies indicate that perfluorinated compounds can harm reproductive processes, negatively impact hormonal balances and promote the growth of tumors.

Once released into the environment perfluorinated compounds break down very slowly. They remain in the environment for several hundred years and are dispersed over the entire globe.

Some are found in secluded mountain lakes or accumulated in wildlife. Some are also found in human blood.

If you have waterproof shoes or a rain jacket that is more than a year or two old, chances are these items were treated with a Durable Water Repellent finish before they left the factory.

This clothing could be leaching trace amounts of these toxic carcinogenic chemicals into your body and the environment. And perfluorinated compounds never break down entirely, so they can continue to cause harm indefinitely.

Luckily, given Greenpeace’s advocacy and resulting consumer awareness, the majority of gear makers have started to phase out perfluorinated compounds.

Smaller brands including Paramo, Pyua, Rotauf, Fjällräven, R’ADYS and Dannah were the first to commit to product lines free of perfluorinated compounds.



Many waterproof rainjackets are made of synthetic chemicals not good for the environment and may make you ill. (Creative Commons - Oakly Originals)

minated compounds, but the bigger players are coming around, too.

W.L. Gore, Patagonia, The North Face, Marmot, Columbia and others have voluntarily committed to phasing out environmentally hazardous formulations by 2020 per Greenpeace’s original ask.

But getting there depends on finding suitable alternatives. Many companies have temporarily switched to less toxic while still fluorocarbon-based repellents while they look for greener formulations.

For its part, Patagonia is betting big (through its corporate investment fund Tin Shed Ventures) on

Switzerland-based start-up Beyond Surface Technologies.

This company was founded in 2008 by scientists who left careers at big chemical companies to make Durable Water Repellent-like textile treatments using natural raw materials.

Contacts: Greenpeace Detox Outdoor Campaign, detox-outdoor.org; Tin Shed Ventures, tinshedventures.com; Beyond Surface Technologies, www.beyondst.com.

EarthTalk® is a weekly syndicated column produced by Doug Moss and Roddy Scheer for the non-profit EarthTalk. To find out more, submit a question, or make a donation, visit us at EarthTalk.org.

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