

Compact fluorescent lights may create more problems than they solve

Light Bulb Moment

Light bulb manufacturers have convinced environmentalists and lawmakers that the compact fluorescent light (CFL) is more energy efficient than the incandescent.

Okay. No problem. When you go to buy a new light bulb, if you care to spend the extra money (CFLs cost about six times as much as incandescents), you might feel good about helping the environment. Nothing wrong with that.

Enjoy.

Problem is, those light bulb makers have quietly mounted a very successful campaign to MAKE you buy their new bulbs. No choice. Their new bulb is your new bulb.

This past December, President Bush signed an energy bill that will make it illegal to manufacture or sell incandescent light bulbs as of 2014. So if you prefer incandescent light, too bad for you. Within a decade, every home in the U.S., including yours, will be lit with little glowing swirls of mercury.

Mercury rising

In the e-Alert "A Modest Proposal" (2/6/08), I told you about the Environmental Protection Agency's tips on how to clean up after a broken CFL. Tip number one suggests you open a window and leave the room for 15 minutes to reduce exposure to mercury.

And why don't you want to be exposed to mercury? Because it's a neurotoxin. What a fantastic idea! Let's fill fragile tubes with a neurotoxin and place them all over the house!

Another tip suggests that when broken CFL debris is on the carpet, you should pick up fragments and powder with sticky tape before vacuuming. But an HSI member named Ed spotted a problem here. Ed writes: "If you vacuum the mercury you will blow the mercury around the room through exhaust of the vacuum cleaner."

Good point, Ed. So to the EPA's tips we can add this one: If you break a CFL in a carpeted area, roll up the carpet, put it on your front lawn, and call the EPA to come take it away.

Environmentalists claim that filling our homes with CFLs will actually lower our exposure to mercury. Here's how the logic goes: About half the electricity in the U.S. is supplied by burning coal, which emits mercury into the atmosphere. But CFLs are energy efficient, so less coal will be burned, and less mercury will waft on the breeze.

And that would be a strong pro-CFL argument if we only used electricity to light our lamps. I don't about you, but at my house the refrigerator, the televisions, the computers, the central air, the microwave and dozens of other appliances all run on electricity. I've got a hunch that most of that burning coal is going to keep right on burning.

Green to partly green

When an HSI member named John read "A Modest Proposal," a CFL went on over his head and he wrote with this question: "Does the danger also exist in the long ones in use for years?"

By "long ones," of course, John is referring to fluorescent tube lighting that many of us already use in our homes. And the answer is yes – the long ones contain mercury and are dangerous when broken. In fact, they're even dangerous when they're not broken in the home. If they're not carefully recycled, they end up breaking in landfills and the mercury may become airborne or migrate into water supplies. According to a U.S. Navy web site, fluorescent tubes in landfills create the second largest source of mercury pollution. You have to imagine that CFLs will only contribute to the problem.

But no, no, no – that won't happen at all, according to environmentalists. Because CFLs will be recycled. See? Problem solved!

Or that's what will happen in some imaginary perfect green world. Meanwhile, back here on earth, who's kidding who? Millions of burned out CFLs will go straight into the trash.

Where's there's smokeno fire?

Out of curiosity I recently purchased a CFL, and was astonished to read this note included in the packaging: "May cause interference to radios, televisions, wireless telephones, and remote controls. Avoid placing this product near these devices."

You've got to be kidding. In our increasingly wireless society, this is going to be the only type of light bulb we can buy? And in rooms where I have a television, I may have to decide between TV or light? Who in the world came up with this insane plan? And even worse – who decided to FORCE it on us?

But wireless interference is just one of the annoying little problem with CFLs

- CFLs don't work well (or sometimes at all) in very cold weather, so operation of porch lights and outdoor security lights in northern states may be erratic in wintertime
- If a CFL is turned on and off frequently, its energy efficiency drops and its highly- touted life expectancy decreases
- Most CFLs can't be used with dimmer switches or timers
- CFLs won't fit in many existing lighting fixtures
- CFLs may smoke or smolder, but don't worry – we're assured they won't catch fire

Energy Star – a government program that encourages energy conservation – offers this hilarious procedure to follow when a CFL fills a room with smoke:

"If you have a product that does begin to smoke or smolder, immediately shut off the power to the CFL and, once it has cooled, remove it from the light socket. Then, send us e-mail to alert us of this incident. Please include the product manufacturer's name and model information that is included on the CFL base and if possible an electronic photo. Also please tell us how the CFL was used – open or enclosed light fixture; indoors or outdoors; base orientation – up, down or sideways. Then visit the manufacturer's web site to find customer service contact information to inform them of the early failure."

When a CFL in my home starts smoking I'm going to get rid of the foul thing. I'm not going to send Energy Star an e-mail, and I'm not going to tell them how I was using it, and I'm not going to visit the manufacturer's web site.

But then maybe someone is busy right now writing a law that will force me to do those things.