

Ask Jon Eakes

The negative side of Microban, BioFresh & other "antimicrobials"

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I just received (October 2014) an alert from Healthy Building News about additives in many building products that are supposed to kill microbes and make the house healthier. These things are called "Antimicrobials". A couple of the best known trade names are Microban and BioFresh.

Little disinfecting affect and big side effects

Yes, you probably thought you made a better purchase because of their presence in your paint, or carpet, or upholstery or even flooring materials like engineered wood floors, ceramic tiles or resilient flooring. Well, the research from respected groups like the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as the Canadian Environmental Law Association and Clean Production Action have concluded that these additives have little affect on disease control but that they are "highly toxic in humans, possess endocrine system-disrupting properties and are highly toxic to organisms living in aquatic environments." Doctors from Johns Hopkins concluded that currently discovered levels of triclosan (one of the main ingredients in these antimicrobials) in the human body "were significantly associated with allergic sensitization."

The Microban website paints a wonderful picture of a totally germ free environment.

"Microban International, Ltd. is the global leader in built-in antimicrobial product protection, engineering durable antimicrobial solutions for consumer, industrial and medical products around the world. Microban protection can be engineered into a breadth of materials including: polymers, textiles, coatings, paper and adhesives.

Built-in to products during the manufacturing process, Microban protection inhibits the growth of microbes. Microorganisms such as bacteria, mold and mildew can cause stains, odors and product deterioration. With Microban antimicrobial protection, microbial reproduction is inhibited throughout the product's useful lifetime. Microban antimicrobial protection ensures continuous, durable and effective antimicrobial protection that provides an added level of defense against damaging microbes without ever wearing off or washing away."

Microbes mutate

Where there may be short term value to a building material that kills germs, there is also increasing concern that just like with overuse of antibiotics, microbes evolve to work around ever-present antibiotics. With triclosan and other antimicrobials permanently impregnated into so many materials around us, microbes have an even better chance of mutating into something that we might have trouble cleaning off of our building materials and soft coverings.

All of this together with the evidence that the protection it does offer is not very effective while being so close to human contact that it is getting into and disrupting our own biological systems.

Short term Green Washing

So it may be time to fight back against this "green washing". If you refuse to buy these products, let the store know why. Right now, as the Microban web site brags, the Microban label increases sales and permits charging more. Legislation is slow to move on these things but if consumers see this as a threat, not a blessing, they can reverse this trend.

For the full article together with all the detailed references and research papers, look up "The Dirt On Antimicrobials" at www.HealthyBuilding.net.

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