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U.S. regulators lack data on health risks of most chemicals

By [Lyndsey Layton](#)
 Washington Post Staff Writer
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This summer, when Kellogg recalled 28 million boxes of Froot Loops, [Apple](#) Jacks, Corn Pops and Honey Smacks, the company blamed elevated levels of a chemical in the packaging.



Kellogg recalled nearly 28 million boxes of cereal in June after reports of a strange taste and odor. (Gene J. Puskar/associated Press)

THIS STORY
 In boxes of cereal, an unsettling surprise
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Dozens of consumers reported a strange taste and odor, and some complained of nausea and diarrhea. But Kellogg said a team of experts it hired determined that there was "no harmful material" in the products.

Federal regulators, who are charged with ensuring the safety of food and consumer products, are in the dark about the suspected chemical, 2-methylnaphthalene. The Food and Drug Administration has no scientific data on its impact on human health. The Environmental Protection Agency also lacks basic health and safety data for 2-methylnaphthalene -- even though the EPA has been seeking that information from the chemical industry for 16 years.

The cereal recall hints at a larger issue: huge gaps in the government's knowledge about chemicals in everyday consumer products, from furniture to clothing to children's products. Under current laws, the government has little or no information about the health risks posed by most of the 80,000 chemicals on the U.S. market today.

[\(As product recalls pile up, consumers risk getting lost\)](#)

"It is really troubling that you've got this form of naphthalene that's produced in millions of pounds a year and we don't have some of the basic information about how toxic it is," said Erik Olson, an expert at the Pew Charitable Trusts, which is advocating an overhaul of U.S. chemical laws. "In so many cases, government agencies are missing data they need on even widely used chemicals about whether they pose a health risk."

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The information gap is hardly new. When the Toxic Substances Control Act was passed in 1976, it exempted from regulation about 62,000 chemicals that were in commercial use -- including 2-methylnaphthalene. In addition, chemicals developed since the law's passage do not have to be tested for safety. Instead, companies are asked to volunteer information on the health effects of their compounds, and the government can decide whether additional tests are needed.

In 1994, the EPA invited the chemical industry to submit health and safety data for 2-methylnaphthalene because it was being produced in large quantities, said Mary F. Dominiak of the EPA. Chemical manufacturers have yet to disclose that information, she said.

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And they may not even have it. If a manufacturer possesses data showing that a chemical harms health or the environment, it is required to turn over the findings to the EPA. Critics say that creates a disincentive for manufacturers to test their chemicals.

Kellogg responded to a request for comment by referring to the statement it issued with its recall, which said, "While the potential for serious health problems is low, some consumers are sensitive to the uncharacteristic off-flavor and smell and should not eat the recalled products because of possible temporary symptoms including

nausea and diarrhea."

Bills pending in Congress would revamp the way the government regulates chemicals, forcing companies to prove that new chemicals are safe before using them and requiring health and safety assessments of existing chemicals, such as 2-methylnaphthalene. The chemical industry has said it agrees the law should be revamped, but it also has expressed concern that new restrictions might hamper innovation and competitiveness.

One federal agency has minimal information about 2-methylnaphthalene -- the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which reviewed the scientific literature on the chemical in 2005. It concluded that nothing is known about its use related to food. "You are not likely to be exposed . . . eating foods or drinking beverages" and risk exposure only "if you live near a hazardous waste site," according to the agency's Web site.

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