

Consumers in dark over risks of new light bulbs

Push for energy-saving fluorescents ignores mercury disposal hazards

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WASHINGTON – Brandy Bridges heard the claims of government officials, environmentalists and retailers like Wal-Mart all pushing the idea of replacing incandescent light bulbs with energy-saving and money-saving compact fluorescent lamps.

So, last month, the Prospect, Maine, resident went out and bought two dozen CFLs and began installing them in her home. One broke. A month later, her daughter's bedroom remains sealed off with plastic like the site of a hazardous materials accident, while Bridges works on a way to pay off a \$2,000 estimate by a company specializing in environmentally sound cleanups of the mercury inside the bulb.

With everyone from Al Gore to Wal-Mart to the Environmental Protection Agency promoting CFLs as the greatest thing since, well, the light bulb, consumers have been left in the dark about a problem they will all face eventually – how to get rid of the darn things when they burn out or, worse yet, break.



Brandy Bridges of Prospect, Maine, shows a newspaper insert promoting the type of CFL (compact fluorescent lamp) bulbs she says have caused elevated levels of mercury in her home upon breaking (photo courtesy: Ellison American)

CFLs are all the rage. They are the spirally shaped, long-lasting bulbs everyone is being urged, cajoled and guilt-tripped into purchasing to replace Thomas Edison's incandescents, which are being compared to sports utility vehicles for their impracticality and energy inefficiency. However, there is no problem disposing of incandescents when their life is over. You can throw them in the trash can and they won't hurt the garbage collector. They won't leech deadly compounds into the air or water. They won't kill people working in the landfills.

The same cannot be said about the mercury-containing CFLs. They bear disposal warnings on the packaging. But with limited recycling prospects and the problems experienced by Brandy Bridges sure to be repeated millions of times, some think government, the green community and industry are putting the cart before the horse marketing the new technology so ferociously.

Consider her plight.

When the bulb she was installing in a ceiling fixture of her 7-year-old daughter's bedroom crashed to the floor and broke into the shag carpet, she wasn't sure what to do. Knowing about the danger of mercury, she called Home Depot, the retail outlet that sold her the bulbs.

According to the [Ellison American](#), the store warned her not to vacuum the carpet and directed her to call the poison control hotline in Prospect, Maine. Poison control staffers suggested she call the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

The latter sent over a specialist to test the air in her house for mercury levels. While the rest of the house was clear, the area of the accident was contaminated above the level considered safe. The specialist warned Bridges not to clean up the bulb and mercury powder by herself – recommending a local environmental cleanup firm.

That company estimated the cleanup cost, conservatively, at \$2,000. And, no, her homeowners insurance won't cover the damage.

Since she could not afford the cleanup, Bridges has been forced to seal off her daughter's bedroom with plastic to avoid any dust blowing around. Not even the family pets are permitted in to the bedroom. Her daughter is forced to sleep downstairs in an overcrowded household.

She has continued to call public officials for help – her two U.S. senators included. So far, no one is beating down Bridges' door to help – not even Al Gore, whose Academy Award-winning movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," urges everyone to change to CFLs to save the planet from global warming.

Bridges is not alone.

Elizabeth Doermann of Vanderbilt, Tenn., had a similar experience. After her CFL bulb broke – because the cat knocked over a lamp – she didn't call Home Depot. Instead, she did what she had always done when old-fashioned incandescent bulbs had broken. She vacuumed up the mess.

Only then did she learn about the mercury hazard.

"If I had known it had mercury in it, I would have been a lot more careful," she told the Tennessean. "I wouldn't have vacuumed it up. That blew the mercury probably all through the house."

The warnings on the packages of some of the new bulbs are in fine print – hard to read. They are also voluntary, with many bulbs being sold and distributed with no disposal warnings at all.

Charmain Miles of Toronto, Canada, had another frightening experience with a CFL bulb.

Last month she smelled smoke on the second floor of her home, only to discover it was emanating from a new energy-efficient bulb.

"I was horrified," she told a local TV station. "I went through every place upstairs and took out every bulb."

The bulb had been placed in a track-lighting fixture. Though the bulb contained no warning about such fixtures, it turns out CFLs are not for use in track, recessed or dimmer fixtures.

And while the Consumers Council of Canada advises not to purchase any package of CFL bulbs that contains no instructions, [the entire country is on a timetable to eliminate entirely the only alternative – the incandescent bulb.](#)

In fact, practically the whole world – fearing global warming – is getting ready to ban the incandescent light bulb. It started in Cuba, moved to Venezuela, then Australia, Canada and the European Union. Now individual states in the U.S., including California, Connecticut, North Carolina and Rhode Island, are all in the process of legislating an end to Edison's greatest invention. Even local towns and cities are getting into the act.

The rap against the incandescent is that it uses more energy to produce light. Advocates of CFLs say they save money and energy by producing more light over more time for less money and less energy. They prefer to minimize concerns about cleanup and disposal, usually saying more needs to be done in the area of recycling.

But recycling experts say the solutions are at least five years away. Meanwhile, millions of consumers and green activists are being persuaded to make the switch.

"EPA currently doesn't provide a unified message to the public on what to do with fluorescent lamps once they are no longer used," admits a draft announcing plans for a pilot project by the agency.

Yet, the EPA's Energy Star program is one of the major forces behind the push for CFLs.

"Currently the need to recycle mercury in fluorescent lamps isn't mentioned on the Energy Star web page although they are working with the Office of Solid Waste to address this," the memo continues. "This may create confusion to the public about doing the right thing."

In fact, even the memo doesn't advise what the public should do.

No question about it, though. You as a consumer will be required to find certified waste recycling centers to turn in your dead and broken bulbs.

The American Lighting Association has some ideas. It has created a list of five considerations that should be weighed by all legislative bodies considering bans on incandescent bulbs.

The association of American manufacturers and retail outlets suggests any such legislation include the following provisions:

1. a lumen per watt energy efficiency standard should be established rather than a ban on a specific type of product. It should include a 10-year goal
2. halogen bulbs should be exempted
3. incandescent bulbs 40 watts or less should be exempt
4. collection and disposal plans for mercury-based CFLs should be made prior to any ban;
5. persuade consumers through education rather than coerce them through limiting choices

Governments may indeed be promoting a kind of lighting that is itself nearly obsolete. Fluorescent lights are nothing new. They've been around for a long time. And while they may save money, some say the public hasn't chosen them for good reasons – including, but not limited to, the mercury issue.

Some experts predict the next generation of lighting, though, is LED lights. They are made from semiconductor materials that emit light when an electrical current flows through them. When this form of light takes over, all bulbs will be obsolete. Your wall tiles can light up. Curtains and drapes can light up. Even your dining room table could be made to light up – at exactly the level you want.

That's what is ahead in the next decade, according to some in the industry.

Nobody promoted CFLs as aggressively as IKEA. Not only does the retailer sell them, it also provides one of the very few recycling centers for the burned out bulbs. But even with a plethora of recycling centers, how will the public view the prospect of saving up dead bulbs and transporting them to recycling centers? And how about the danger of breakage in that process?

"The industry is currently aiming at totally mercury-free CFL lighting, but this is still five to 10 years away," admits IKEA.

Those who really care about this problem right now are those involved in the waste industry.

"Most agree more energy-efficient light bulbs can significantly curb air pollution, but fewer people are talking about how to deal with them at the end of their lives," explained a page 1 story in the April 2 issue of Waste News. It goes on to explain "there is no plan to address air and water pollution concerns that could develop if consumers improperly dispose of the mercury-containing devices."