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Backyard Burning and Your Health

The Polk County Board of Health and the Polk County Health Department urge residents to learn more about the important issue of backyard burning and asks residents to consider alternatives to burning, such as chipping, composting, curbside waste pickup and recycling.

Until a few decades ago, burning garbage in the backyard was much less dangerous to your health. People may say, “We’ve been doing it for generations, so what’s the big deal now?” Fifty years ago, most household garbage contained only untreated paper, wood, and glass. Today’s garbage contains paper, plastics, and other types of packaging waste that release a hazardous mixture of carcinogens and other toxics (such as lead, mercury and arsenic) when burned. Even seemingly harmless items, like paper, mail, packaging, and cardboard boxes used for frozen pizzas and vegetables can give off toxic emissions.

According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, exposure to garbage burning smoke can increase the risk of heart disease, cause rashes, nausea, and headaches in addition to being an irritant that affects people with sensitive respiratory systems. But the health concerns go well beyond those who are directly exposed to those indirectly exposed to these toxic chemicals through their food. Dioxin, a known, potent human carcinogen and endocrine disrupter, is the main concern. Dioxin exposure is especially harmful for children, pregnant women and the elderly. It can have significant impacts on human immune, developmental and reproductive systems.

Because burn barrels are more common in the rural, agricultural areas of the state, there is particular concern about high levels of dioxin settling on crops and in our streams and lakes, eventually winding up in the food we eat. Dioxin produced by backyard burning is deposited on plants, which in turn are eaten by animals. When people eat meat and dairy products, the dioxin is also absorbed. Over 90 percent of all human dioxin uptake comes from meat and dairy consumption. The United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that one burn barrel (from an average family of four) can produce as much or more dioxin as a full-scale municipal waste incinerator burning 200 tons per day.

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Burning garbage in burn barrels or fire pits creates low-temperature fires (less than 2,200 degrees F), which receive very little oxygen and produce a lot of smoke. Under these conditions, a variety of toxic substances are produced and then released directly into the air without being treated or filtered.

The arguments for reduced backyard burning are clear: 1) burning causes the largest remaining source of dioxin, a potent carcinogen, as well as other health and environmental risks; 2) an estimated 20 million Americans still burn their garbage on-site; 3) proximity to animal feed and food crops creates a serious risk to our food supply; 4) backyard burning contributes immensely to wildfires each year.

For more information, please contact Brian Hobbs, Polk County Health Department, 715/485-8532.