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Johnson & Johnson, amid activists' push, steadily removing toxic chemicals from baby products

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TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Amid pressure from activists, Johnson & Johnson said Wednesday that it is continuing efforts to remove traces of two harmful chemicals from its baby products around the world.

An international coalition of consumer and environmental groups has been pressing J&J since May 2009 to remove two potentially cancer-causing chemicals from products including its signature Johnson's Baby Shampoo, long advertised under the slogan "No More Tears."

Two weeks ago, the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics was emboldened after finding the health care giant had removed the two chemicals — 1,4-dioxane, considered a likely carcinogen, and quaternium-15, a chemical that releases the preservative formaldehyde — from products in several other countries, including the U.K., Scandinavia and South Africa.

So the campaign pushed J&J to also remove trace amounts of the chemicals from products sold in the U.S., China and elsewhere, urging a worldwide boycott of J&J baby products via its Facebook page and its website, <http://www.safecosmetics.org>.

The company's decision, which gave a firmer timeline but is very similar to its response to the coalition two weeks ago, comes as it faces scrutiny over its product quality. That's after J&J has conducted more than two dozen product recalls over the past two years for problems ranging from glass and metal shards in liquid medicines to painful, defective hip implants.

The New Brunswick, N.J., company generally still has a Teflon reputation, but questions about the safety of its baby products led to a rebuke from the Chinese government earlier this month and thousands of consumers writing the company that they would no longer buy those products, according to the campaign.

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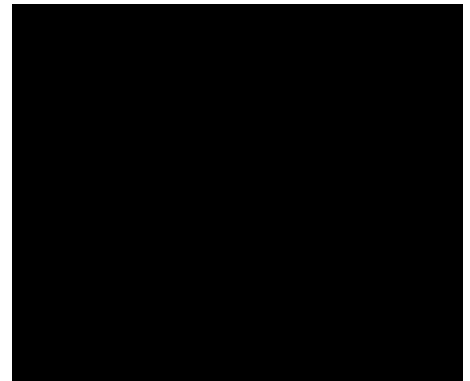
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Johnson & Johnson told The Associated Press that it expects to remove all quaternium-15 from its hundreds of baby products within about two years — sooner for baby shampoo. It's already started providing some versions with alternative preservatives.

The company said it's been working with global suppliers to require them to reduce traces of 1,4-dioxane to less than four parts per million and that most already meet that standard. The company's "long-term goal" is to keep seeking new alternatives that don't produce 1,4-dioxane in the manufacturing process, J&J said in a letter sent late Wednesday to the campaign's director, Lisa Archer.

"We think it's an important step forward. We look forward to the day when all their products are free of carcinogens and other chemicals of concern," campaign spokeswoman Stacy Malkan said.

J&J wrote that it understands product safety is important to parents, noting that last year it removed phthalates, another dangerous chemical, from its baby products. The letter did not discuss any plans for removing the three chemicals from products for adults, such as its Aveeno and Neutrogena skin care lines.

"I'm glad that they're moving forward. I'm disappointed that it's taking so long," said Jennifer Taggart, a Los Angeles attorney and author who blogs about how to limit children's exposure to harmful chemicals at her Web site, www.thesmartmama.com. She plans to advise her readers to continue avoiding J&J products because the safer ones are still being phased in.

"In my household, we never use J&J baby products because they contain a number of potentially harmful chemicals," said Taggart, the mother of a young boy and girl. "If they can produce for Europe a product that doesn't contain carcinogens, why can't they produce it for (American) babies?"

Susan Nettesheim, who heads J&J's evaluation of product chemicals and safety, told the AP J&J uses different product formulas in different countries, "based on the availability of raw materials, development of formulas that were done in many cases years ago and consumer preferences" for the look and feel of products.

J&J, which also makes Band-Aids, medical devices and biologic drugs, has repeatedly said formaldehyde-releasing preservatives are safe and legal. However, the campaign notes there are no standards for those chemicals in personal care products in the U.S. and many other countries.

The campaign and outside experts say the chemicals irritate the sensitive, highly permeable skin of babies and, combined with all the other chemicals to which they are exposed, contribute to health risks.

On Nov. 1, the campaign sent Johnson & Johnson CEO William Weldon a letter signed by about 25 environmental, medical and other groups that have about 3.5 million members worldwide. It urged the company to publicly commit by Nov. 15 to removing the chemicals from all personal care products. The letter was signed by the American Nurses Association, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Environmental Working Group, Breast Cancer Fund and other groups.

The campaign also released a report called "Baby's Tub is Still Toxic." It said quaternium-15 was still an ingredient in Johnson's Baby Shampoo sold in the U.S., Canada, China, Indonesia and Australia, even though it's not in the same product sold in at least eight other countries, from the U.K. and Denmark to Japan and South Africa. Some countries where the products did not contain the harsh chemicals had bans on them, but others didn't.

The second chemical, 1,4-dioxane, ironically is a byproduct of a process for making chemicals gentler on the skin.

J&J said then that it was gradually phasing the chemicals out of its baby products. Its Johnson's Naturals baby shampoo does not include 1,4-dioxane, but costs twice as much as

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original Johnson's baby shampoo.

Malkan said the harmful chemicals are "widely used in other products."

"We are pressing for all companies to remove these chemicals," she told The AP.

The campaign has been trying to help parents find the safest products for their children, through information on its Web site and a link to a database compiled by Environmental Working Group, at <http://www.ewg.org/skindeep>. It lists ingredients for more than 69,000 personal care products, with from academic and other reliable sources on chemical hazards, regulatory status and available studies.

Meanwhile, Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., called J&J "a good corporate citizen" for making the changes. Markey is the lead sponsor of the Safe Cosmetics Act, which would include requirements that the Food and Drug Administration set rules barring carcinogens and other toxins from cosmetic products and that all ingredients be listed on packaging.

Markey said the act would close a "gaping hole" in federal law.

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