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Budget slows replacement of possibly unhealthy cups

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Dining Services is replacing plastic cups in campus dining halls due to a possible health threat. But because of budget concerns, they will only replace broken cups instead of all the cups immediately.

The plastic cups contain the chemical Bisphenol A, or BPA, which has been linked to numerous health problems. The new cups will be BPA-free.

"Since the news of potential detrimental health effects of BPA broke last spring, we have been searching for a replacement cup that is both BPA-free and affordable," Ann Hoffman, director of administration for Dining Services, wrote in an e-mail to The Herald.

The cups in question have the number seven on the bottom in the recycling symbol, which signifies that the plastic is polycarbonate. The Herald reported last spring that the polycarbonate used in these cups contains BPA, which has come under scrutiny in recent months after the Canadian government declared the plastic compound toxic.

BPA acts as a hormone disrupter in the body because it's broken down into natural estrogens. "This is an estrogen and we've seen with other estrogens in the body that there is a decreased ability to have children and an increased risk of cancer," said Scott Belcher, a professor at the University of Cincinnati who studies BPA and plastics. Belcher recently published a study showing that BPA was leached up to 55 times more rapidly after polycarbonate plastic water bottles were exposed to boiling water.

Belcher said that the age of the plastic doesn't seem to matter. "It looks more like it's the repeated high-temperature washing. With polycarbonate cups in a cafeteria, it's probably being released."

Hoffman wrote that plastic cups in the dining halls are exposed to "high-heat dishwashing" but added that due to budget limitations, Dining Services "couldn't afford to replace our entire inventory of cups at one time."

Students outside the dining halls expressed surprise and concern when told about the presence of BPAs in the plastic cups they'd just used. "Replacing the cups should be a priority that the school puts money towards," Meredith Hunt '11 said.

"I'm surprised," Zach Wilson '12 said. "I think that it's important enough if it's a health risk for them to spend the money and replace all the cups. It's weird that they've only replaced some. It should be all or nothing."

In the meantime, Belcher said, "there is clear reason for caution based on the science. My personal choice would be to avoid the polycarbonate."

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