Toxic shock
When my lab test turns up dirt I didn’t know was in me, I put on my detective hat to track down the culprits
BY ADRIA VASIL

As slates go, mine feels like a pretty clean one.

I eat organic at home, I only use natural body care products and eco or DIY cleaners. My water is filtered. There’s no compressed wood in my rented apartment that can off-gas formaldehyde, or vinyl counters to shed phthalate dust (although, hmm, what are those faux tiles in my bathroom made of?).

But two Sundays ago I peed on a lab stick and sliced off a few hunks of hair from the back of my head to send for testing so I could find out how many toxins I’m pulling in from the world around me.

What I’m snooping for is the big boomerang effect – you know, how our environment and what we put in it comes right back at us like a slap upside the head. That’s the gist of environmental health, really.

Growing up, in part, in a pulp and paper/aluminum smelter town in Quebec, in the era of Scotchgard®ed surfaces on a steady diet of tuna sandwiches and canned ravioli, I know I should have plenty of embedded chems in my body.

But I’ve repented. Actually, over the course of a few years, my whole family largely did. Led by my big brother Nick, we turned into a bunch of mostly vegetarian alt-health junkies – even more so when he developed pretty serious environmental sensitivities.
Since I was a teen, I’ve slowly eased myself off a growing list of enviro toxins. But how clean can you get? Testing by the peeps over at Environmental Defence shows that whether you live in small-town BC, northern Canada or big-city Toronto, we’re all polluted.

Thing is, to get the full lowdown on what’s in you, you’re talking a $1,000-to-$2,000 blood test. If you’ve got worsening chemical sensitivities, allergies, rashes, joint pain or a depleted immune system, your naturopath may very well suggest a boiled-down pollutants urine scan and/or heavy metals hair test.

Admittedly, apart from the headaches I get from the cleaning aisle and the wave of queasiness that comes on when I’m near perfume, I’m not sure I qualify as a prime candidate for the testing, but I’m curious – especially knowing that the Silent Spring Institute just last month released results on over 50 categories of products and found a lot of them aren’t listing all their ingredients on the label. Yes, natural brands included.

Five health-store sunscreens contained up to seven harmful chemicals not disclosed on the package, including estrogenic UV filtering chems like oxybenzone. What if one of my favourite brands is hiding something?

In the days leading up to my test, I’m hyper-aware of everything I come in contact with. I cringe at lathering up with restroom suds – you know, the pink stuff in public washrooms. (FYI, the orange kind is pretty much guaranteed to leave your palms floating in triclosan, though so can the blue, white and pink ones.)

I do a rough apples-and-oranges assessment: what’s worse, a few bacteria or a shot of triclosan, parabens and phthalates? I resolve to carry on and lather as usual in the name of science.

Might as well order a hot bowl of Chinese takeout soup steeped in polystyrene, aka styrofoam, while I’m at it, to see if I can spike my carcinogenic styrene level the night before I do the test. Call it “pulling a Slow Death By Rubber Duck,” à la Rick Smith and Bruce Lourie.

Next morning I wake up, pee on the stick and send it off in the mail along with my baggy of hair, then wait.

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Lo and behold, weeks later, there it is staring back at me on my computer screen, the little styrene spike on my chart from my takeout soup. George Gillson, MD, medical director of the Rocky Mountain Analytical lab, is on the line helping me break down my results. He says I
shouldn’t worry. It’s definitely in the “normal” North American range, to which I reply, “Don’t normal North Americans eat a lot of styrofoam takeout?” He concurs.

Moving right along, I’m happy to hear that my phthalate levels (at least the kind of phthalates found in scented personal care products) are really low, a sign that my natural body care products are telling the truth about being phthalate-free. So why are my parabens a little higher?

Could be the restaurant soap from the night before, but that Silent Spring study has me wondering if anything in my medicine cabinet is hiding parabens on me. After all, that study found parabens in some health food store products, though 34 of 39 of them were in the clear. I’m just going to have to trust in the better odds I get buying health store products versus drugstore ones.

The biggest spike in my system is a xylene metabolite, at levels higher than 75 per cent of the North Americans in the system. “Is that bad? Nobody knows,” says Gillson.

But let’s back up. What is xylene anyway? It’s basically an organic solvent and VOC in paint thinners, dirty car exhaust, second-hand smoke and all the nasty solvents that eat holes in your brain. How the heck do I have higher than average levels of that? Well, says Dr Gillson, it could be coming from unexpected places like bike chain cleaner, inks, dyes, paint stripper and oil paint. I’m mentally crossing off the list – no, no, no, no….Wait, did you say oil paint?

Suddenly, it hit me. We repainted our living room with eco paints four months ago, and at the time an old can of oil paint was accidentally applied to the fireplace. Since the smell went away in a few days, I let it go.

“So are you saying the xylene’s been in my system since December?” Turns out the paint’s still off-gassing today, even if I can’t smell it. I’m floored.

Then my hair results come in. Uranium, cadmium, arsenic are all in there at “normal” levels, though the test shows I have “higher than average” lead and mercury exposure. What the? I don’t have mercury fillings, I eat large fish like tuna very, very rarely (i.e., mercury-tested cans of BPA-free Raincoast Trading tuna), I don’t wear leaded lipstick, I drink filtered water.

I ask Gillson how old my exposure could be. He reminds me that lead and mercury stay in the body for a lifetime. Truth is, mercury is in the air, thanks to coal plant pollution. Either way, he says, I seem to be “tolerating” these pollutants. I joke that maybe I could be 10 IQ points smarter if I hadn’t chewed on so many lead necklaces as a teen.
He notes that I’ll need to follow up with a naturopath if I want to make a more solid link.

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So does knowing how toxic I am actually help me in any way? I’m just grateful for the reminder that even if you can’t smell stuff, you can still be inhaling nasty fumes; that harmful chemicals can be hiding in places even an ecoholic has trouble finding; and, for the sake of our health and our planet’s, we should never stop trying to root them out.

ecoholic@nowtoronto.com | twitter.com/ecoholicnation

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