

Fatal Conveniences™: Holiday Decorations: Decking the Halls with Lead

[00:00:00] Fatal Convenience Intro

Darin: It's that time of the week for another fatal convenience. This is a bite-size segment that addresses some of society's fatal conveniences and the steps you can take to avoid becoming a victim of them. I define fatal conveniences as the things we may be doing because the world we live in makes us believe we have to. Tap water, shampoo, sunglasses, food... I dive into the hidden truths behind some of our everyday choices that could not only be harming us but even killing us, so let's dive in.

[00:00:41] Fatal Convenience - Holiday Decorations: Decking the Halls with Lead

Darin: Hey, everybody, this is Darin Olien. This is another great instalment of fatal conveniences. I just want to say it is a happy holiday for me. I'm going to focus on the decorations. The decorations are great. It's great to ornament your house, your home and get in the spirit of whatever you think the holiday is, bringing family and friends together, sitting around the tree, if that's what you're into, candlelight, everything else, but now we've gotten into all of this fake stuff. It's less about the real trees. Like I said, I'm referencing the fatal convenience I did right before this. So if you haven't checked that out, check out fake Christmas trees and plastic Christmas trees as it relates to real Christmas trees. In this instance, the root of all this used to be in nature.

[00:01:37] Nature as the original holiday decor

Darin: It used to be real stuff, but now we have this really crappy, toxic plastic, almost disposable, it breaks. It doesn't really last year to year, and we're using this and upon touching it, upon off-gassing in our home, it can be very detrimental. I'm going to get into Christmas and how this evolved a little bit because decorations and decorating your home and trees and everything else was largely well before Christmas, and even they found out an ancient Roman area and the feast of Saturnalia, which is thought of having origin in the 5th century BC. The timing of the Roman festival of lights turned into what is now known as Christmas day before religion was even created. How crazy is that? Some 900 years later, a Christian bishop in Turkey was disapproving members of the congregation who were drinking and having festive dances and were decorating their doors in pagan fashion as the time of the year. Moving Christmas decorations over from America tells a story of religious tradition and new technologies that over time became Christian as we know it today. Before the Christian green fir trees were used, they were actually used by pagans to celebrate the winter solstice and other seasonal festivals. Trees were adorned with natural decorations such as pine cones, berries, nuts, and later the candles that were handmade and ornaments they put on the trees. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Christians and modern-day Germany adopted the tradition of the tree as a symbol of everlasting life with God. This is when many classic ornaments started to appear such as the angel star on top of the tree. Those who couldn't afford that built pyramids of wood decorated with paper, apples, and leaves to mimic

the appearance of the green fir trees. People are so innovative. Then in the 18th and 19th centuries, German immigrants brought these practices to America. The Christmas traditions were rejected by the puritanical religious groups due to the historic pagan origins. But then, the interesting thing, England's Queen Victoria celebrated Christmas for the first time because she had a German-born husband, Prince Albert in 1840. Ultimately, that turned everything. So he basically brought this over. It was from a pagan tradition, but since they kind of adorned it as hey, this is fine to do, Christmas decorations became the status symbol of the wealthier Americans imitating their European counterparts. There you go. In 1856, President Franklin Pierce put the first Christmas tree up at the White House. How cool is that?

[00:05:00] America's obsession with holiday decorations

Darin: And then from there, of course, more traditions continued as it goes. From there more American Christmas traditions emerged, such as the National Christmas Tree at the White House and at the Rockefeller Center, the famous huge Christmas tree. Back to the decorations, it is estimated that the Americans spend more than \$6 billion annually on Christmas decorations. That is a lot of money. More than 80 million homes get decorated, and over 150 million strands of lights are sold each year. Here's the interesting thing. One of the things that we discovered in 1610 when silver was high as a precious commodity, Germans in Nuremberg, interesting, displayed strands of silver. They were so abundant with that commodity, they displayed it on their tree. Now it's known as tinsel. Obviously, people couldn't afford it. Then they made tensile displays over time and then used candles to reflect more and more and that was the equivalent of having wealth. Another little fun fact, mistletoe is a highly medicinal herb. Interesting note that the Celts and the druids use that herb for fertility and virility and vitality. So that's where it kind of took on the tradition of as you stand under it, you kiss because that was really anchored in the tradition of virility, vitality, and fertility. So what makes it convenient, obviously, you can buy all this cheap stuff from the store. You can throw it on your probably fake Christmas tree, which is again, I go into the Christmas tree, the fake Christmas trees, and the fatal convenience before this, so make sure to check that out. But it's very easy. You buy this stuff, you throw it in your tree, it looks pretty, it looks adorned, it gets you in the spirit. I get it, it adds color to the house, cheer, everyone's happy. It's clear that it's Christmas holiday. What makes it inconvenient to have all this stuff?

[00:07:15] So what's the problem with decorations?

Darin: Well, a new study by the Ecology Center has found that seasonal decorations sold at top retailers contain hazardous chemicals. They tested products, including beaded and tinsel garlands, artificial wreaths, and greenery stockings, figurines, and other tabletop decorations, gift bags, and obviously ornaments that you put on the tree. These products were tested for substances that have been linked to asthma, birth defects, learning disabilities, reproductive problems, liver toxicity, and cancer. Is that in the spirit of Christmas? I don't think so. The researchers found that two out of three of these products have one or more hazardous chemicals that have been linked to these serious health effects. Again, no regulation, ladies, and gentlemen, none because it's not putting on your body. We already know that the regulatory agencies aren't even doing their job and they're not even testing these things in our population. We know this. So these things are coming into your home

hazardous and emitting these off-gassing, endocrine-disrupting, potentially cancer-causing chemicals. Chemical hazards, such as the ones found in these decorations can be released into the air, dust, and on the skin when handling these products resulting in this exposure. Again, all of this stuff is found in the show notes and the resource materials. As most decorations are made of plastic, we already know the off-gassing of plastic, the Bisphenol A, the endocrine-disrupting aspects of that, so in this unregulated decoration industry, these plastics are just thrown out over and over and over again, and they last for 450 to 1000 years on our landfill. It's not just plastics that we need to worry about, but it's these metals that's in the Christmas lights. It can last up to 60 years in a landfill. It's aluminium and it leeches into the ground, it leeches into our waterway and lasts for over 200 years. Dr. Kenneth Spaeth, the chief of Environmental Medicine at Northwell Health in New York City talked to Healthline about lead exposure from these decorations. He said lead is still used in a number of manufacturing processes in consumer items just as these. He also warned that parents should be very cautious with children around these holiday ornaments. Listen, kids are all over in that stuff. He notes that while lead exposure is unlikely through skin contact, it can very easily enter the body through the mouth, "especially with young children who are more prone to put items in their mouth. Now you've got a very direct pathway for exposure." So why are these decorations harmful? Lead, about 100 parts per million, the Ecology Centers did a study. They found that 13% of 2014 holiday products contained lead at over 100 parts per million, 12% of the products contained more than 100 parts per million of bromine, indicating the presence of fire retardants. Here we go again, fire retardant showing up in these products. Beaded garlands were found to contain a multitude of toxic contaminants mirroring the results from the group's 2013 study of beaded garlands. Light strings were also compared to our earlier study by healthstuff.org. The 2014 lights included lights attached to decorations commonly showed high levels of lead bromide. The Guardian also published The Ecology Center study and continued on to say that according to the study, home decorations are largely unregulated, may legally contain lead, or phthalates. Again, here's the phthalates again. For example, in quantities prohibited in children's products by the Consumer Product Safety Commission, as long as the product is not labelled as being intended for children, it is not subject to lead, cadmium, or phthalate restrictions. That's crazy. As long as they label it differently, even though children are going to interact with it, they get around it. Massive, massive loophole.

[00:12:30] Hidden flame retardants in your ornaments

Darin: Mike Schade of Safer Chemicals, a coalition representing more than 450 organizations including the Ecology Center says that some of these substances such as halogenated flame retardants and phthalates are dangerous even at low levels. He says that "scientists who have studied these chemicals are telling us that even smaller exposures are of concern for hormone-disrupting chemicals such as these. Evidence continues to pile up that shows even babies are affected by exposure to these chemicals in the womb." Here are some things to wean off of this and lessen your impact. Buy things that you know you will be able to reuse over and over and over again.

[00:13:05] How to lessen the risk of exposure

Darin: Ryan Collins notes that buying decorations that last longer that you can reuse from year to year is definitely a positive step for the environment. Reuse older decorations, if you

can. You can also have a family tradition of using the old stuff that has had a chance to off-gas or maybe don't have those things. You can borrow and swap with other families and that can get a little pod together and just swap ornaments. Therefore, you're not buying other ones or you're not throwing them away. Check-in with your local charities. We have sources in the show notes for that. When handling your decorations, healthystuff.org recommends common-sense precautions. So do not let your children or adults for that matter put small holiday ornaments in their mouth. Don't touch them and put your fingers in your mouth. Wash your hands after handling any of this holiday stuff and even on the tree. Frequent vacuuming and reducing the level of dust because it carries through the dust and through the air. What can you do instead? Make it a tradition of actually doing this yourself. Do you know what we used to do as kids? Popcorn, popcorn on string, and you just string it along and you do it yourself, you do it with your children. You can use ribbons of old clothes and cut it up. You can use the beads that you had. You can use beans, you can dry those out. You can do all kinds of things, glue things together, go out, get some twigs, get some flowers. You can do all of this stuff and make it a very fun holiday and I get it, it takes time but you can still be a little creative and not use toxic things that are exposing you and your children. You can certainly opt for a real Christmas tree. Like I said before, I cover this, it's a very sustainable business using a real Christmas tree. It's actually one of the most sustainable, long-term businesses every year, so you can support this. You can also rent a real tree and give it back to them and they replant it. How cool is that? Rent of living tree. Currently, it's a program in Oregon and California. You can also buy and decorate a potted Norfolk pine tree. Again, use your creativity, make your own tradition. Traditions come from traditions, but the traditions have got into toxic tinsel, toxic decorations, toxic reefs, all of that stuff. Let's go back to nature. Let's go back to doing it ourselves. We can do this. Again, multibillion dollar industry. If you keep buying this toxic stuff, they keep making it, so don't buy it this year. If you haven't bought any yet, don't. Get creative. Buy a real reef, buy a real stick reef, buy some cool ornaments, make them yourselves, do it with your children, do it with your spouse, do it with your family. That's a fun tradition to start. You're also doing better by not breathing in these toxins for weeks and a month. And your children are in the carpets, they're at eye level and breathing level to your tree. So this is about waking up to your common sense, your instincts. I am telling you, this is not me making any of this up. This stuff is real. It's invisible. You're breathing it in. It's a toxic experiment that we don't want to participate in any year. Let's make it a joyful holiday, a nontoxic holiday, a sustainable holiday for yourself, for your life, for your family and for your children. Happy holidays, everyone.

[00:17:01] Podcast Outro

Darin: Thanks for tuning in everyone. I hope that left you feeling inspired to take a closer look at the everyday choices you're making and how they could be impacting your health and even the planet. If you want to learn more about life's fatal conveniences, head over to fatalconveniences.com. You can sign up for the exclusive access to Fatal Conveniences episodes, news, insights, and more. And all this great stuff gets sent each week straight to your inbox, making it really easy. Now, that's a convenience without the negative side effects. It only takes a few seconds to join. Just fill in the form and take that amazing step towards making better choices. Remember, small changes can have a big impact. So, keep diving my friends, keep diving. And if you haven't had a chance to check out the interview, I released earlier on the week, here's what you missed: