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Faulty Ovens Hurt Eyes

WASHINGTON — Many husbands gave their wives microwave ovens for Christmas, unaware that even the manufacturers hold some ovens suspect in eye irritations and perhaps cataracts.



The flashy high-speed cookers can bake a two-pound meat loaf in 15 minutes. But if the oven leaks microwave rays badly it can also broil a couple of eyeballs in half an hour.

A private test done by Litton Industries, a giant conglomerate that makes microwave ovens, hints at the hazards.

Litton forthrightly supplied us with a copy of the research. "Microwave Effects on Rabbit Eyes." Rabbits' eyes are similar to human eyes.

Although the conclusions are couched in soothing terms, here are the actual findings from the researchers. They apply to all brands.

Ovens with extremely bad leaks, which can come from rough handling in transit, caused pre-cataract symptoms in two of 45 rabbits and resulted in lens changes that lingered up to a week in three other rabbits.

The ovens simulating bad leaks also produced "irritation in the anterior part of the eye" that lasted up to two days and even at "lower power levels there was occasional reddening of the eyes."

A Litton spokesman, in Beverly Hills, said chances of injury were "very, very remote. You'd be heating up and feeling it in time to move. You'd have to be standing close to a crack. It's not impossible, but it's dog-goned improbable."

To be sure, a person probably would have to stare for some time at the rare oven which leaks badly to get cataracts. Nevertheless, the dangers of microwave exposure and long-term effects remain largely unexplored, and badly need public airing.

A prestigious industrial hygiene journal reported recently, for instance, that a 40-year-old microwave oven repairman suffered impotence, genitalia disease and blotchy, bleeding skin.

Other members of the microwave family, such as radar, have been tied to cataracts. Just last month, the Journal of the American Medical Association reported microwave warmers for transfusion blood had broken down red cells, endangering patients' lives.

Not surprisingly, some segments of the microwave industry are doing what manufacturers generally do when their sales are endangered: attack those who raise questions.

For example, the journal of the non-profit, tax-exempt International Microwave Power Institute recently carried a venomous pro-industry attack on us for asking tough questions about microwaves.

It was written by the journal's editor, John Osepchuk, who, in a stunning conflict of interest, also happens to be a full-time employee of Raytheon, a firm that has a multi-million dollar stake in microwave equipment.

Another microwave specialist, Prof. Sol Michaelson of Rochester University, whose views often parallel those of industry, sneered at our articles as amateurish. As it turns out, Michaelson is a consultant to the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers and takes speaking fees from the microwave industry.

Michaelson windily offered to instruct us on microwaves, but when we asked him how much money industry has shoveled into his pockets, he clanged shut like an oven door.

"That's a perfectly ridiculous question," he huffed.

Footnote: The Public Health Service found one out of ten microwave ovens have emissions beyond even the loose standards laid down by the federal government. Industry could have prevented many of these hazards by postponing production of the ovens until they were safer or by including some simple testing device with the ovens.

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