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## A little more light reading

**A CLOSER LOOK:** Conclusion of our two-part look at these energy-saving bulbs and concerns surrounding them

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With a ban on most incandescent light bulb sales looming, sales of energy-saving compact fluorescent lamps, left, have grown. But health, environmental and other concerns surrounding CFLs have some consumers seeking alternatives, like even more efficient LED lights. (Courtesy EcoLEDS.com)

With Ottawa and several provinces poised to ban sale of incandescent light bulbs by 2012, many Canadians are turning to compact fluorescent lamps as an alternative.

CFLs are a variation on traditional fluorescent tubes designed to fit conventional light sockets. They use about 66-75% less electricity than an equally bright incandescent bulb, one maker says.

When these low-pressure mercury vapour lamps are switched on, the mercury vaporizes, is charged or "excited" by the electricity, generating ultraviolet rays that excite a phosphor coating lining the bulb and produce light.

As we detailed in our last article, Health Canada contends that unbroken compact fluorescents pose no health threat to most people, and even broken units pose a very small risk to your health unless improperly or carelessly handled.

Health Canada's position is summarized in its It's Your Health article, The Safety of Compact Fluorescents, at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vbs/iyh-vsv/prod/cfl-afc-enf.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vbs/iyh-vsv/prod/cfl-afc-enf.php).

But several health professionals have argued in published research that there's evidence linking CFLs, which generate ultraviolet and electromagnetic radiation and "dirty electricity," to health issues as skin rashes and headaches.

Some of these arguments are touched on in the environmental petition, Environmental and Health Concerns Associated with Compact Fluorescent Lamps, submitted to the Auditor General of Canada in June 2008 by Magda Havas and Thomas Hutchinson of Trent University's environmental and resource studies department. see it at [www.electricalpollution.com/documents/08\\_Havas&Hutchinson\\_EP\\_CFL.pdf](http://www.electricalpollution.com/documents/08_Havas&Hutchinson_EP_CFL.pdf).

Concerns also have been raised about compact fluorescents' impact on the environment.

Since each CFL contains about five milligrams of mercury and other harmful gases, the fear is various types of pollution will occur when lamps hit landfill sites.

When the mercury in CFLs mixes with water, it changes into its more toxic organic form. If not cleaned up, there are concerns this will contaminate the land, water table and eventually the air.

"CFLs need to be deposited at a toxic waste facility," Havas and Hutchinson write. "Few Canadians are aware of this."

In addition to local household hazardous waste programs, several retailers, including Home Depot, Rona and Ikea, offer CFL recycling programs.

With the 2012 ban on most incandescent bulbs looming and concerns over use of CFLs, many people are now seeking alternatives for indoor home lighting.

Light-emitting diodes are emerging as a possible alternative. Energy-efficient LEDs, which generate light by running electric current across semiconductor material, have been around for years in everything from home appliances and electronics to giant TV screens and traffic lights, and have been making rapid inroads as Christmas lights.

Unlike incandescents, they don't waste energy by generating heat and have no filament to burn out, so they last — up to 60 times longer than incandescents and 10 times longer than CFLs, experts say.

And unlike compact fluorescents, they contain no mercury or other toxic substances. According to current information, they pose no health or environmental hazards.

But the cost of manufacturing LED bulbs as bright as incandescents still puts widespread use beyond the reach of many average consumers. Currently, the LED equivalent of a 60-watt incandescent bulb ranges from \$30 to \$50, or more.

Some makers have refined their manufacturing process to boost bulb brightness. And as demand increases, costs are likely to drop.

Meanwhile, Health Canada is expected to complete a study of ultraviolet and electromagnetic emissions from CFLs this year. It has agreed to report its findings and work with makers and distributors to take corrective action, if necessary, under the Radiation Emitting Devices Act.

It remains to be seen whether this will answer health and environmental experts' concerns.

One thing, however, is clear: consumers need to be aware of the impact of energy-saving lighting technologies so they can choose the solution that works best for them.

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