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AB 916: Safer Soaps Act

Background: Many consumers shopping for hand soap or body wash reach for products labeled "antibacterial," believing they offer greater protection against illness and germs than washing with plain soap and water. To the contrary, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) says: "studies have not found any added health benefit from using antibacterial soap... Their ingredients may not be safe... And they contribute to antibiotic resistance." Similarly, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) says: "There is no evidence to show that over-the-counter antibacterial soaps are better at preventing illness than washing with plain soap and water... Data suggests the antibacterial ingredients could do more harm than good..."

In summary, both the [CDC](#) and [FDA](#) say that in everyday use, antimicrobial soaps are not more effective than plain soap *and* could pose serious public health risks. [Recent research](#) found that common active ingredients in antibacterial hand soap are linked to neurological, reproductive, and respiratory harm and can contribute to the rise of antimicrobial-resistant superbugs.

Problem: Though the FDA discourages the use of antibacterial soap and has [banned 19 antimicrobial compounds](#), the agency has delayed formal regulatory action on three remaining antimicrobial compounds: benzalkonium chloride, benzethonium chloride, and chloroxylenol. Benzalkonium chloride and benzethonium chloride are the only two Quaternary Ammonium Compounds (QACs) authorized for use as antimicrobials in antibacterial soaps and body washes. In 2016, the antimicrobial manufacturers had requested one additional year to demonstrate the safety and effectiveness of these three antimicrobials; the chemicals are still on the market and in

even wider use more than eight years later due to the phaseout of other ingredients. During this delay, evidence has grown on their health harms and any benefits of antimicrobial soap over plain soap in everyday use has not been demonstrated.

QACs, also referred to as "quats", are skin irritants and exposure through breathing can irritate the lungs, especially for sensitive groups and children with respiratory illnesses or asthma. **The consistent overuse of QACs contributes to antibiotic resistance, which poses an increasing threat to children who may develop drug-resistant infections.**

Antimicrobial resistance is now [a considerable factor](#) in disease incidence and [poses a major global public health threat](#).

The California Department of Toxic Substances Control is currently considering "Quaternary Ammonium Compounds in Cleaning Products and Beauty, Personal Care, and Hygiene Products" for potential future regulation under the Safer Consumer Products Program, a hopeful step but one which could take years.

Solution: California can take the lead in fixing this problem by passing the AB 916, Safer Soap Act, which would ban the sale of over-the-counter hand soaps and body washes containing these three antimicrobial compounds. This common-sense bill would protect Californians, particularly children, from health harm and help prevent the global antimicrobial resistance crisis. Like the PFAS-Free Beauty Act and other recent landmark California bills, it could become a *de-facto* national standard and spur market changes across the U.S. and beyond to protect our health and ecosystems from harmful and unnecessary antimicrobial chemicals.

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