

Formaldehyde-Free Food Prep



Are bamboo cutting boards safe for food? Nice that they're made from a renewable resource, but what about the glue holding them together? Are some brands safer than others?

You are right to be concerned about the safety of bamboo cutting boards. Cheaply made boards are manufactured using formaldehyde-based glues, but there are plenty of choices available that use safer adhesives.

Boards made with formaldehyde-free, food-grade glues include those made by **Totally Bamboo** (www.totallybamboo.com) and **Bambu** (www.bambuhome.com). Both companies work closely with their factories in China to insure that products are manufactured properly and sourced from well-managed bamboo farms. Still, if you want to avoid toxic glues, **Building for Health** (www.buildingforhealth.com) sells a bamboo board that uses no glue at all; the pieces are held together by a stainless steel band.

So why is formaldehyde even appearing in cutting boards? Mainly for drying purposes. "Bamboo is so porous," says Tom Sullivan, president and founder of Totally Bamboo, and it requires a thicker glue to prevent absorption while keeping the product intact. But thick glue takes longer to dry. "Formaldehyde allows you to apply heat and have the glue-bond done in about ten minutes," he notes, adding that their formaldehyde-free glue takes a few hours to dry.

Still, in spite of the fact that the International Agency for Research on Cancer has classified it as a human carcinogen, the FDA deems formaldehyde-containing glues to be safe for use in food-grade applications and hasn't pushed companies to find an efficient, healthier alternative. The European Union, on the other hand, has banned formaldehyde in food-grade adhesives, so make sure to look for bamboo products that are specifically labeled as E.U. compliant and as using only food-grade, formaldehyde-free adhesives. In general, these adhesives are used for higher-end bamboo cutting boards, while boards at box stores or discount kitchen outlets don't always comply with E.U. rules. Another reason not to be tempted by a lower price tag: Cheap bamboo products don't always identify the sources of their bamboo, and given that there aren't any third parties that certify bamboo plantations as being well-managed or operated in any sort of environmentally friendly manner, there's no assurance that the bamboo wasn't raised on clear-cut forestland.

If you're feeling like formaldehyde is leaving an unpleasant aftertaste in your dinner, remember that cutting boards are only a small source of exposure. Offgassing from urea foam insulation and wood products, such as plywood and particleboard that use formaldehyde as a component of their glues, are major sources commonly found in houses, while cigarettes remain a large contributor in the homes of smokers. Formaldehyde also crops up in everything from wrinkle-free fabrics to paints and cosmetics. Seek formaldehyde-free alternatives to those products as well when it comes time to replace them.