

Your Toxic House: Healthy Housekeeping

A Few Facts About Why You Should Care:

- **Chemicals used for cleaning the home can negatively impact human health, indoor air quality, and water quality. This includes both chronic (long-term) and acute (short-term) exposures.**
- Children are most negatively affected by exposure to household chemicals due to their growing brains and bodies, behavior (crawling, putting items in their mouth), and their small size relative to the dose.
- Many chemicals in housecleaning products, including those that cause cancer, nerve damage, and birth defects, are absorbed through the skin.
- 120,000 children under six were poisoned by household cleaners, according to the American Association of Poison Control Centers.
- A report by the Consumer Safety Commission has identified 150 chemicals commonly found in the home, which have been linked to allergies, birth defects, cancer, and psychological impairment.
- Certain chemicals used in common cleaning products have been associated with reproductive harm such as decreases in fertility, changes in the onset of puberty, cancers of reproductive organs, miscarriage, premature birth and other effects.
- Phthalates are carriers for fragrance in glass cleaners, deodorizers, laundry detergents and fabric softeners, and also used in some plasticizers (chemicals used to soften plastic) and are linked to adverse effects on male children, reduced sperm count in adult men, and increased allergic symptoms and asthma in children.
- A 15-year study showed that women who stayed home all day had a 54% higher death rate from cancer than women who held jobs away from home. The study concluded that this was due to daily exposure to such hazardous household chemicals as ammonia, benzene, chlorine, formaldehyde, methylene chloride, naphthalene, toluene, xylene, and trichloroethylene.
- Dry cleaning fluids, spot removers, and furniture polishes contain the solvents benzene, perchloroethylene (PERC) or other petroleum distillates. PERC vapors can linger in the air in your home for as long as a week after newly dry-cleaned clothes are placed in a closet, according to the EPA, which classifies PERC as a hazardous air pollutant. These chemicals can cause neurological damage, can depress the central nervous system, are toxic to the liver, and are suspected carcinogens.

Resources/ Information is Adapted From:

<http://hpd.nlm.nih.gov/products.htm>

<http://www.chechnet.org/>

<http://healthychild.org/>

Monroe County Environmental Services, 760-7600

What You Can Do:

- Reduce clutter in the home. Clutter collects unhealthy dust!
- Use safer alternatives like baking soda, borax, or “green products.”
- “Wet Clean”
 - Work wet- mist the area you’re cleaning with water before dusting or sweeping
 - Use a 2 bucket system when mopping- one for soapy water, the other for rinsing.
- Use a HEPA filtered vacuum if possible.
- Store household chemicals such as cleaning products/bleach/pesticides, out of the reach of children. Use a locked cabinet if possible.
- Store household chemicals in their original containers.
- Never leave household chemicals out, even for a short break.
- After you are done using a product, immediately close caps and spouts tightly and store the product out of children’s reach.
- Safely dispose of household chemicals.
- Remove children, toys, and pets from the area you are cleaning before using a household chemical.
- Keep doors and windows open when cleaning for good ventilation/airflow.
- Read the label on the household chemical and carefully follow the directions.
- Before using a chemical, locate on the chemical’s label what do to in case of a spill/accident.
- Use the amount of product listed on the directions. Never use more than directed!
- Do not mix household chemical products. Never mix bleach and ammonia.
- Wear gloves/goggles/mask as directed on product label.
- Do not smoke or eat when cleaning with household chemicals.
- Wash your hands when you are done cleaning.

Alternative Cleaners:

General Information

- Buy a few high quality spray bottles that you can use many times. Bottles with ounce measurements on them are especially useful for measuring and mixing.
- Be sure to label your mixtures to avoid confusion.
- **Liquid soap** means *castile soap*, a mild soap once made from olive oil, but now may include other vegetable oils as well. Coconut oil soaps are another good alternative to petroleum-based soaps.
- **Vinegar** means *distilled white vinegar*, available by the gallon at your supermarket. Note that while vinegar has a slight scent while wet, when dry, it leaves no odor.
- **Washing soda** and **borax** are minerals related to *baking soda*, but are stronger and more caustic. Though natural, both washing soda and borax can irritate skin, so use gloves. Borax can be toxic when swallowed, so keep it out of children's reach at all times. Both of these items can be found in your supermarket's laundry aisle.
- ALL cleaners, whether homemade or store bought, and cleaning ingredients should be kept safely away out of the reach of children and pets in locked cabinets or high places.
- You can also buy safer, environmentally friendly cleaning products, too. You'll find them in natural foods stores and some supermarkets.
- Investigate and experiment on your own! There are many alternatives and some work better than others- determine what works best for you!

KITCHEN

- **Countertops:** For a "soft scrub," mix together baking soda and liquid soap until you get a consistency you like. The amounts don't have to be perfect. Make only as much as you need, as it dries up quickly.
- **Ovens:** To clean extra-greasy ovens, mix together 1 cup baking soda and 1/4 cup of washing soda, then add enough water to make a paste; apply the paste to oven surfaces and let soak overnight. The next morning, lift off soda mixture and grime; rinse surfaces well.
- **Microwave ovens** can be cleaned with a paste of 3-4 tablespoons baking soda mixed with water. Scrub on with a sponge and rinse.
- **Cutting boards:** Disinfect them by spraying with vinegar and then with 3% hydrogen peroxide (available in drug stores). Keep the liquids in separate spray bottles and use them one at a time. It doesn't matter which one you use first, but both together are much more effective than either one alone.

Kitchens are one place where disinfecting is recommended for other select items like utensils and countertops.

BATHROOM

- **Tub and tile cleaner:** Mix 1 2/3 cup baking soda, 1/2 cup liquid soap and 1/2 cup water. Then, as the last step, add 2 tablespoons vinegar (if you add the vinegar too early it will react with the baking soda). Immediately apply, wipe, and scrub.
- **A good all-purpose disinfectant:** 2 teaspoons borax, 4 tablespoons vinegar and 3 to 4 cups hot water in a spray bottle. For extra cleaning power, add 1/4 teaspoon liquid soap to the mixture.
- **Toilet bowl:** Pour 1 cup of borax into the toilet before going to bed. In the morning, scrub and flush. For an extra-strength cleaner, add 1/4 cup vinegar to the borax.
- **Drains:** Prevent clogged drains by using hair and food traps. To de-grease and sweeten sink and tub drains, pour 1/2 cup of baking soda down drain followed by 1 cup vinegar; let bubble for 15 minutes; rinse with hot water. You might have to repeat the whole procedure more than once or leave the baking soda and vinegar to "cook" overnight.

LIVING ROOM

- **General dusting** is best done with a damp cloth. Dry dusting simply stirs up dust and moves it around. Also, try 1 teaspoon olive oil per 1/2 cup vinegar. Mix together in a bowl and apply with a soft cloth.
- **Furniture polish:** Mix olive oil and vinegar in a one-to-one ratio and polish with a soft cloth. Or look for food-grade linseed oil, often called omega-3 or flaxseed oil, rather than the type found in hardware stores to finish furniture. Linseed oil sold for furniture use often contains dangerous [petroleum distillates](#) to speed evaporation.
- **Windows:** Put 3 tablespoons vinegar per 1 quart water in a spray bottle. Some recommend using half vinegar and half water. For extra-dirty windows try this: 1/2 teaspoon liquid soap, 3 tablespoons vinegar and 2 cups of water. Shake well. The best way to get streak-free windows? Use newspaper instead of paper towels to wipe them.

METAL POLISH

- **Brass, copper, bronze and aluminum:** To remove tarnish, rub metal with sliced lemons. For tough jobs, sprinkle baking soda on the lemon, then rub.
- **Sterling silver:** Put a sheet of aluminum foil into a plastic or glass bowl. Sprinkle the foil with salt and baking soda, then fill the bowl with warm water. Just soak your silver in the bowl and the tarnish will migrate to the aluminum foil. Finally, rinse, dry and buff your silver with a soft cloth.

AIR FRESHENER

- Vinegar and baking soda are great room fresheners. Vinegar deodorizes, while baking soda absorbs odors. A simple recipe of 1 teaspoon baking soda, 1 teaspoon vinegar (or lemon juice) and 2 cups hot water in a spray bottle can be spritzed in the air to remove odors. Zeolite, like baking soda, absorbs odor. Set out either in bathrooms and closets.

FLOORS AND CARPETS

- **Vacuuming** is an important part of floor maintenance. We recommend using a machine with a [HEPA](#) filter, which traps very small particles that are otherwise blown back into the room in the vacuum's exhaust. [Consumer Reports](#), which ranks appliances, has found that some vacuum cleaners without HEPA filters were also effective. No matter what kind of vacuum cleaner you use, be sure pass over carpet several times and more in heavy traffic areas.
- **Linoleum:** For extra grease-cutting, try this formula: 1/4 cup washing soda with 1 tablespoon of liquid soap, 1/4 cup vinegar and 2 gallons hot water. Put the washing soda in the bucket first and add the liquid ingredients — this way the soda won't splash out. Caution: Do not use this formula on waxed floors! For an extra polish, combine 6 tablespoons of cornstarch per cup of water in a bucket.
- **Disinfect floors:** Add 2 gallons of hot water to 1/2 cup of borax. (Put the borax in the bucket first, then add water to avoid splashing.)
- **Wood floors:** Vinegar is a natural disinfectant, and it pulls dirt from wood. After a large party, I used 1 cup vinegar per pail of hot water to clean my wood floors — the smell disappeared immediately. You can also use it on other types of floors — it's a gentle yet very effective floor cleaner.
- **Carpeting And Rugs:** Regular vacuuming will help keep carpets their cleanest. Sprinkle baking soda over the surface of the carpet and let it stand for 15 – 30 minutes before vacuuming to soak up and eliminate odors. HCHW recommends against the use of chemical carpet cleaners because of health concerns associated with their ingredients. If you want to steam clean your rug, use plain water and make sure it dries thoroughly. For other carpet cleaning tips, see [How to Clean Carpets Without Dangerous Chemicals](#).

LAUNDRY

- **Laundry brightener:** Add 1/2 cup of strained lemon juice to the rinse cycle.
- **Fabric rinse:** Add 1/4 cup of vinegar to the washing machine's rinse cycle to remove detergent completely from clothes, eliminating that scratchy feel. This will not leave your clothes smelling like vinegar!
- **Detergent booster:** To reduce the amount of laundry detergent you need to use, add baking soda or washing soda. These minerals soften the water, which increases the detergent's power. For liquid detergent, add 1/2 cup of soda at the beginning of the wash. For powdered detergent, add 1/2 cup of soda during the rinse cycle.
- **Bleach:** Use hydrogen peroxide instead of chlorine bleach.
- **Dry cleaning:** Many delicate "dry clean only" items can be washed at home by hand. In general, it's best to use cool water and a mild liquid soap. Squeeze or wring gently and lay flat to dry.

MOLD & MILDEW

If you discover mold and mildew in your house, first find the source of moisture and stop it. It's pointless to clean mold if it's only going to return!

- **To clean mold:** Remember to wear gloves and a facemask, since mold spores can be inhaled. Use a stiff brush, a non-[ammonia](#) detergent and hot water to scrub mold off of non-porous surfaces. Use a stiff bristle toothbrush to get in between tiles. You can also use a paste of baking soda or borax and water. Don't rinse.