

Reducing Hazardous Products in Your Home

Thousands of household products sold each year contain toxic ingredients. Drain cleaners, oven cleaners, pesticides, and furniture polish are a few examples. Use them improperly and, these products can endanger our health and the air quality in our homes. Dispose of them improperly, and they can pollute our drinking water. What can you do to reduce the amount of hazardous products in your home?

1. Use multi-purpose cleaners.

Contrary to what advertisers would have you believe, you do not need a different product to clean each surface in your home. There are many products that will clean a variety of different surfaces. Multi-purpose cleaners can reduce the number of cleaners you use, reduce the number of hazardous products in your home, and save you money, too! Read and follow label directions carefully.

2. Buy the least harmful product available.

Do you know the difference between a product that is labeled *poison* and one that is labeled *danger*? These signal words are regulated by the federal government. Any product which contains hazardous substances must be labeled as such. The front label must include a warning and a description of the hazard.

POISON. . . highly toxic or poisonous
DANGER. . . extremely flammable, corrosive, or highly toxic
WARNING or CAUTION. . . moderately or slightly toxic

The product must include a statement telling you how to avoid the hazard and how to use the product safely.

To reduce the danger in your home, buy cleaners labeled "warning" or "caution" and pesticides with "caution" on the label. These products are less harmful.

When reading labels, do not be fooled by the words "non-toxic." This is an advertising term. It is not defined by the federal government, so it can be used on toxic products.

It is very important that you know as much as possible about products before you use them so that you can protect yourself and your family. If a product label doesn't give a list of ingredients or adequate instructions for its safe use, choose another product.

Pesticides Are Different

Regulations concerning pesticides are different. On pesticides, the word "warning" means that the product is moderately toxic. This means that one teaspoon to one ounce can kill an average adult. The word "caution" means that

the product is slightly toxic. It would take over one ounce to kill an average person.

For more information on levels of hazards, see Hazardous Household Products.

3. Use preventative measures.

There's an old saying that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That's true for cleaning and polishing. If soil is allowed to accumulate, removing it becomes more difficult. Wiping up spills when they occur can prevent stains and eliminate the need for tough specialty cleaners, which often are more toxic and more harmful to surfaces.

For example, harsh abrasives gradually scratch and chlorine bleach can dull the shiny finishes of sinks, bathtubs, and appliances with porcelain enamel surfaces. Once the surface becomes dull and rough, it will get dirty faster and stain deeper. Then it becomes almost impossible to keep clean.

Wipe away grease and spills in the oven after each use, or put a liner on the oven bottom to catch spills and you can reduce the need for an oven cleaner.

Cover sink and shower drains with a screen to keep out food scraps and hair. Don't pour grease down the drain. Collect it in an empty can and put it in the trash. These steps will reduce your need for a drain cleaner.

Open windows to air out the house occasionally to avoid the use of chemical air fresheners.

4. Use alternative or less toxic, homemade products.

One way to get a safer product is to make it yourself. For "recipes" for homemade cleaning products, see [Cleaning Recipes for a Healthy Home](#). Homemade products have definite advantages, but they also have disadvantages. Be sure to consider the following:

What do you gain by making your own products?

- *Economy* -- Many of the ingredients are inexpensive, so you may save money over time.
- *Storage space* -- Many of the ingredients are common household products you already have, and you can mix up small batches so that you don't have to store many products.
- *Control of the chemicals in your home* -- Since you mix them, you decide the amount and type of chemicals in the cleaning products you use.
- *Safety* -- Homemade products generally have less toxic chemicals in them. They are safer for you, the air in your home stays cleaner, and disposal of these products is less dangerous.

What are the problems related to homemade products?

- They may take longer to clean effectively. Since they may not be as strong, they may take more time to work. You may need to let the product "sit" on the surface for longer than usual, or you may have to go over a surface several times.
- More elbow grease may be required. You may have to scrub harder.
- They may not clean as well. If you have used harsh cleaners on surfaces over a long period of time, the surface may be scratched. Then you will need strong chemicals to truly clean deep stains.

If you decide to make your own cleaners, you must use and store them safely. While the ingredients in homemade cleaners are safer, they are not all non-toxic. Keep these guidelines in mind:

1. Be careful what chemicals you mix. Some chemicals, such as chlorine bleach and ammonia, produce a very toxic gas if they are mixed together.
2. Do not mix more than a month's supply at a time. The chemicals may lose their effectiveness.
3. Mix solutions in a well-ventilated area.
4. Store all cleaning solutions out of reach of children.
5. Store solutions in unused, store-bought containers. Use permanent storage containers which are kept in a permanent location. Never put them in old food containers. They may interact with residue from the original contents, or they may be mistaken for food or beverage.
6. Label containers carefully. This is especially important if other people in your home clean or have access to the cleaners.

Managing Hazardous Cleaners

It may be impossible for you to eliminate hazardous cleaning products in your home, but you can still reduce the risks to your family and your environment by making wise buying decisions and by handling products properly.

When Buying:

1. Read labels. Make sure the product will do what you want and that you will feel safe using it. If ingredients aren't listed, choose another brand.
2. Select the least hazardous product. Let the signal words -- poison, danger, warning, or caution -- be your guide.
3. Buy only as much as you need and use it up in a short period of time.
4. Avoid aerosol products. Choose the pump spray or another alternative. Aerosols have toxic propellants which can explode. Also, the fine mist is more easily inhaled.
5. Choose water-based paint, glue, shoe polish, and similar products rather than solvent-based products.

When Using:

1. Read the directions and follow them. Using more of a product doesn't mean you'll get better results.
2. Wear protective equipment, such as rubber gloves, as recommended by the manufacturer.
3. Handle products carefully to avoid spills. Keep the container closed tightly when it's not being used to avoid fumes and spills.
4. Use products in well-ventilated areas. When working indoors, open windows and use a fan to circulate the air toward the outside. Take plenty of fresh-air breaks.
5. Do not eat, drink, or smoke while using hazardous products. Traces of chemicals can be carried from hand to mouth.
6. Do not mix products unless directions say that you can do so safely. Even different brands of the same product may contain incompatible ingredients.
7. If you're pregnant, avoid exposure to toxic chemicals. Many toxic products have not been tested for their effect on an unborn infant.
8. Don't wear soft contact lenses when working with solvents and pesticides. They can absorb and hold the chemicals next to your eyes.
9. Carefully and tightly seal products when you finish. Escaping fumes can be harmful and you will avoid spills.
10. Use common sense.

When Storing:

1. Follow label directions.
2. Leave the product in its original container with the original label attached.

3. Never store hazardous products in food or beverage containers.
4. Make sure lids and caps are tightly sealed.
5. Store hazardous products on high shelves or in locked cabinets out of the reach of children and animals.
6. Store incompatible products separately. Keep flammable products away from corrosive products.
7. Use volatile products -- those that warn of vapors and fumes -- in a well-ventilated area.
8. Keep containers dry to prevent rusting.
9. Store rags used with flammable products, such as furniture stripper and paint remover, in a sealed, marked container.
10. Keep flammable products away from heat, sparks, or sources of ignition.
11. Know where flammable materials are located in your home, and know how to extinguish them. Keep a fire extinguisher or materials to control fires where you can get to them.
12. Never store hazardous products in the same area as food.

Summary

There are several ways you can reduce the amount of hazardous products in your home and protect your air and water.

- Buy and use multi-purpose cleaners on a variety of surfaces, rather than buying a different product for each surface.
- Buy the least harmful product available. Read the label and buy products marked "Warning" or "Caution" rather than "Danger" or "Poison."
- Wipe up spills when they happen to avoid the need for strong chemicals to remove stains later.
- Make your own cleaning products.

Reducing the number of hazardous products you buy reduces the sources of household hazardous waste later. Wise buying decisions and good management practices can reduce the hazards in the home, in the air we breathe and in the water we drink.

For more information on proper disposal, see [Disposal of Hazardous Household Wastes](#). For more information on reducing waste in general, see [Packaging Choices that Reduce Waste](#).

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Prepared by [Dr. Wilma Hammett](#), Housing Specialist, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, N.C.

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