

Cleanse Your Home: Tips for a Healthy, Toxin-reduced Haven

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A clean home is a haven. Even if you despise wiping down counters and washing tiled floors (does anyone actually enjoy it?), the reward of organizing and sanitizing your living space to a degree that even your mother would appreciate is very gratifying. But, while you admire your sparkling windows and stain-free carpeting, do the words “toxic” and “hazardous waste” spring to mind? Probably not; and yet, those terms may aptly describe the very substances left on the surfaces and fixtures of your home in place of the dirt.

Anyone who has ever watched television or browsed through the advertisements of a magazine is familiar with the sometimes not-so-subtle messages often made by manufacturers of household cleaning products. Want smiling, gleeful children that dance under rainbows while wearing their Sunday finest? Product X will guarantee this happy picture on laundry day and make a statement that reflects pretty well on laundering moms (and dads) across the map to boot. But, what the manufacturer forgot – and isn't required – to tell you is that the optical brighteners added to the product to reflect light and make the fabric merely appear to be brighter can cause severe allergic reactions, or that little Johnny or Susie may be wearing a residual pesticide next to their skin.

The Chemistry of Cleaning Products

Ready for some eye-opening facts? Most commercial cleaning products rarely come down to a simple case of soap and water. In fact, they are often laden with agents that are classified as hazardous wastes and have known toxicity that can damage organs and the central nervous system. What's worse is that manufacturers are not required to list the individual ingredients of a product on the label. In fact, it's very rare that you'll ever see them there. Moreover, poor labeling standards allow manufacturers to make sweeping statements like “Harmful if Swallowed” that leaves the long-term dangers a mystery. Here's a rundown of some seemingly innocuous products that you may currently be using and their potential ingredients.

Laundry Detergent – Aside from the optical brighteners already mentioned, these products may also contain alkylbenzene sulfonate, a known liver carcinogen that is readily absorbed through the skin, a very poisonous substance known as tetrapotassium pyrophosphate, or fluosilicate, a toxic pesticide.

Dishwashing Liquid – This is one of the leading causes of accidental poisonings of young children in the home. Many of these liquid soaps (which are actually detergents) contain two hazardous wastes: naphtha and chloro-ortho-phenylphenol. The former is a neurotoxin and the latter is highly toxic to humans and “bioconcentrates” by remaining in the fatty tissue of humans and wildlife. Another common ingredient found in dishwashing liquids is diethanolamin, a caustic substance suspected of being damaging to the liver.

Disinfectants – These products may contain naphtha, benzalkonium chloride, phenols, sodium sulfites and triclosan, among other toxins. Benzalkonium chloride damages mucous membranes and phenol (carbolic acid), known to cause liver and kidney damage, are nerve-

deadening agents. Phenol is absorbed through the skin and can trigger convulsions, coma, respiratory arrest and even death in certain individuals. Triclosan is also easily absorbed via the skin and associated with liver damage. Sodium sulfites can be fatal to chronic asthmatics.

Furniture Polish – Once again, there's an impressive list of toxins found in these products that may include naphtha, phenol, diglycol laurate, amyl acetate or nitrobenzene. Diglycol laurate and amyl acetate depress the central nervous system. Diglycol laurate is also damaging to liver and kidneys. Nitrobenzene is readily absorbed through the skin and is highly toxic.

Air Fresheners – Would you believe that what is supposed to clear the air actually covers up the offending aroma with recognized carcinogens such as formaldehyde and piperonyl butoxide? In fact, these products are usually chemically engineered to obstruct your sense of smell by coating your nasal passages with nerve-deadening agents. These products may also contain methoxychlor, a pesticide that bioconcentrates in the environment.

Enter the Green Scene

By now, you're probably taking a different view of those gleaming surfaces and that basket of dazzling laundry, or the products that make them so. Contaminants such as those listed above not only pose the threat of poisoning young children, or target the vital organs and tissues of those that handle them, but they leave a residual buildup on surfaces as well. And, as for the laundry, wearing clothing that has been saturated with liver carcinogens and pesticides is akin to the patch effect in terms of exposure.

Interest in "green" products for the home is growing by leaps and bounds, primarily because the general public is becoming more active in their role. If you recall the advertising scenario given above, consumers are often misled and manipulated into thinking that the old household stand-bys reign supreme by "magical" ingredients and on the merit of being conventional. For most consumers, the last twenty years have been spent as a little fish in a big pond with the question of "How can I make a difference?" looming large. But, consumers now realize that their purchasing power has real muscle and that it's not only possible, but downright sensible, to expect high quality products that do not sacrifice human safety and environmental responsibility. By taking action, even one step at a time, every consumer can be a big fish in a little pond. But, where does one begin?

On the Road to Nontoxic Cleaning

It's actually quite easy to be green, but it probably won't happen overnight. You may have a vast array of toxic cleaning products already on hand that need to be addressed. Using them up, donating them or scheduling a toxic waste pickup with your local authorities are far better alternatives to simply pouring them down the drain. Once your old cleaners are out of the picture you'll be amazed at how simplified your life and how uncluttered your cabinets will be!

The next step is to replace your old cleaners with non-toxic ones. Your health food store is a great place to find eco-friendly products and I'm very happy to say that many supermarkets are beginning to carry them as well. Of course, you can also make many of your own products in minutes and for sheer pennies. What kinds of ingredients do nontoxic cleaners contain? This list won't strain your eyes or tax your knowledge of chemistry, but nontoxic cleaners found on the market may contain one or more of the following: water, vegetable or oil-based soaps, vegetable dyes, essential oils (such as citrus or botanical oils), alum or

other minerals, vinegar, baking soda and washing soda. Yep, that's basically it. There may be others adorned with complicated names, but manufacturers of eco-friendly products are not shy about listing them. One word of caution though - the terms "natural" and "biodegradable" are not governed by any regulatory definitions, so learn to read labels carefully. If a suspicious ingredient presents itself on a label, or you don't understand what a component is, call the manufacturer and ask for an explanation. If the company is truly marketing a natural, nontoxic product, they'll be more than happy to offer one.

Herbal All-Purpose Cleaner

This formula disinfects and can be used on any washable surface in your home. Since it's also antiviral and antifungal, it's particularly suitable for kitchens and bathrooms.

1 cup water

1 cup vinegar

2 teaspoons liquid castile soap (usually sold as a concentrate and available in health food stores and some supermarkets)

25 drops essential oil of thyme, eucalyptus, tea tree, lavender, sandalwood OR lemon

Add all ingredients to a large spray bottle (about 22 ounces) and shake before using.

Lavender Soft Scrubber

$\frac{3}{4}$ (three-fourths) cup baking soda

$\frac{1}{4}$ (one-fourth) cup powdered milk

$\frac{1}{8}$ cup (one-eighth) liquid castile soap

5 drops lavender essential oil

Combine all ingredients in a squirt-top bottle and add enough water to make a smooth paste. Shake or stir to mix. Apply to surface, then wipe area clean with a damp sponge or cloth. Rinse well.

Basic Laundry Alternative

The vinegar in this formula will help to remove stains, odors and soften the water. It will also help to prevent static cling in the dryer.

1 ounce liquid castile soap

1 cup washing soda (available in supermarkets in the laundry aisle)

1 cup baking soda

1 cup white vinegar

Fill washer with water and add each ingredient in the order given. Launder as usual.

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