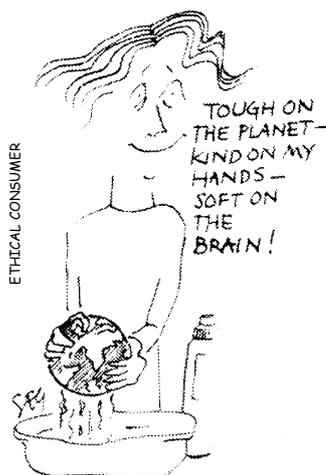


Hazards in the Home

Cleaning Products



Fewer than a quarter of the chemicals used in toiletries and cleaning products have been subjected to a full safety investigation, while others, officially classed as hazardous, are found in products from baby lotion to eye drops and cleaning fluids. Chemicals banned in other more tightly controlled areas are still commonly used in thousands of household products.

Women who work at home have a 54 per cent higher death rate from cancer than those who work outside the home, a statistic that is closely related to the rise in household cleaning products and toiletries.¹

There is enormous pressure from advertising to buy the latest powerful cleaners, "anti-bacterial" sprays etc, playing on peoples' fears about hygiene, or not having a "spotless home". There has been a rise in chronic disease which is directly linked to the use of industrial cleaning chemicals. Also, the routine use of "anti-bacterial" products decreases immunity from bugs, rather than protecting us from them.

Some examples of dangerous chemicals are:

- **Sodium hypochlorite** (in chlorine bleach): if mixed with ammonia (itself an irritant), releases toxic chlorine gas. Short-term exposure may cause mild asthmatic symptoms or more serious respiratory problems.
- **Hydrochloric acid or sodium acid sulphate** in toilet bowl cleaner; either can burn the skin or cause vomiting diarrhoea and stomach burns if swallowed; also can cause blindness if inadvertently splashed in the eyes.
- **Phenol and cresol** (in disinfectants): can cause diarrhoea, fainting, dizziness, and kidney and liver damage.
- **Nitrobenzene** (in furniture and floor polishes): can cause skin discoloration, shallow breathing, vomiting, and death; associated with cancer and birth defects.



Other products such as oven cleaners, carpet cleaner, room deodoriser, laundry softener and detergent, mould and mildew cleaner, mothballs, and spot removers can contain toxic ingredients.

Alternatives

One of the problems is the quantity used. This is partly because manufacturers often recommend quantities which exceed the amount necessary. The cocktail of chemicals and the cumulative effect of long-term use adds to effects. But there are cheaper alternatives anyway, which many people used before we were tied in to modern living.

They may not be sexy but:

Soda crystals (sodium carbonate), also known as washing soda, used to be the most common household cleaning product. You can use soda crystals for kitchen floors, work surfaces, to clean the draining board, wall tiles and left overnight in the sink they will clear tea stains.

Bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) is also an effective cleaning product around the house. It can be used as an oven cleaner. Spread on a paste of baking soda and water; leave for three minutes and then wash it off with a scouring cloth and hot water.

Vinegar is a good alternative to many cleaning products. Use half vinegar, half water solution to clean windows, tiles and mirrors.

Lemon juice can be used for cleaning toilets as well as cooking, (but don't do both together!!)

Borax is a naturally occurring mineral, soluble in water. It can deodorise, inhibit the growth of mildew and mould, boost the cleaning power of soap or detergent, remove stains.

Cornstarch, derived from corn, can be used to clean windows, polish furniture, shampoo carpets and rugs, and starch clothes.²

Tea tree oil has disinfectant properties, and salt too is a mild disinfectant.

Sources of Information

1. Pat Thomas, *Cleaning Yourself to Death* (2001) Newleaf, Dublin
2. Gary A Davis & Em Turner *Safe Substitutes at Home: Non-toxic household Products*, EnviroSense, <http://es.epa.gov/techinfo/facts/safe-fs>

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