

Managing Your Household Chemicals



Your Home Contains Hazardous Chemicals

Household products are potentially hazardous if they pose risks to people, animals or the environment. Many of the chemicals that are used in everyday activities can be poisonous when they enter aquatic systems (lakes, ponds, streams, or rivers) and can also contaminate area drinking water supplies. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the average household in America generates 20 pounds of hazardous household wastes annually. The typical home also stores 100 pounds of hazardous wastes.

How Do You Know if a Product is Hazardous?

Hazardous chemicals fit into one of the following categories:

- CORROSIVE** – able to eat through other materials;
- FLAMMABLE** – can ignite or burn readily;
- REACTIVE** – will undergo rapid chemical change such as bubbling or explosion if improperly used;
- TOXIC** – poisonous, can cause severe illness or death if inhaled or swallowed.

Many household products have cautionary labeling. The purpose of cautionary labeling is to alert consumers to potential human health hazards resulting from improper use. The Federal Hazardous Substance Act requires household cleaning products to be labeled by manufacturers as follows:

- CAUTION or WARNING** – Risk is minor; permanent damage not likely to result with first aid treatment

- DANGER** – Risk is substantial; typical for flammable, corrosive or toxic products
- POISON** – Extremely risky; a severe hazard (uncommon on household products).

Cautionary labeling does not apply to environmental hazards resulting from improper use. Some products with no or low-level cautionary labeling may cause significantly more harm to the environment than they would to human health.

Protect Yourself, Your Family, Your Community

You can prevent human health and environmental problems, and save some time and money by making wise choices in the purchase and use of hazardous household products.

At the Store:

- Read labels thoroughly.
- Select products with the least cautionary labeling.
- Compare products.
- Seek the least hazardous products to accomplish the job.
- Products mixed with water are better for the environment.
- Select the right products.
- Buy products with safety closures.
- Choose products with environmental friendly packaging (i.e., recyclable symbols).
- Look for concentrates, which use less packaging.
- Purchase the smallest amounts needed.

At Home:

- Follow directions on products.
- Consider using all-purpose products to accomplish multiple tasks.
- Discover safe, tested, alternative products that may also save you money.
- Store cleaning chemicals safely in locked cabinets in the kitchen, garage and hobby areas, away from children, the sun, heat, and ignitable sources.
- Store pressurized containers away from heat sources and moisture to prevent explosion and rusting.
- Use products in well-ventilated areas.
- Store products only in original containers.
- Dispose of containers when empty; don't reuse.
- Do not mix commercial chemicals.
- Use appropriate landscaping techniques to reduce chemical applications.
- Do not use septic system additives. Some may actually damage your system.
- Wear protective clothing – long pants, long sleeved shirts, gloves, goggles, closed shoes and hats (in some cases) as recommended on the label.
- Dispose of cleaning rags in a safe manner to avoid spontaneous combustion.
- Keep fire extinguishers handy throughout your home. (Check with your fire department for recommended type.)
- Do not burn or bury leftover oil, chemicals, paints, pesticides or containers.
- Do not pour leftover products down storm drains or on the ground.
- Do not wash chemicals down impervious surfaces (paved driveways and sidewalks).
- Never pour chemicals down the sink or storm drain.
- Do not apply pesticides on windy days.

If chemical spills do occur, clean up with an absorbent material like kitty litter or sawdust to avoid dispersion.

You can reduce the amount of cleaners used by following some practical household tips:

- Clean up messes when they occur. Stronger cleaning products may be required to remove stains once they set.
- Use water or a dampened cloth whenever possible to polish or eliminate spills.
- Reduce mildew in bathrooms by installing an exhaust fan. Squeegee shower walls after bathing.
- Pour fat/grease in metal containers, not down the drain.
- Wipe up oven spills promptly after cooking.
- Vacuum rugs frequently to reduce the necessity of shampooing.
- Regularly bathe pets and comb with a flea comb.

In Your Community:

- Follow your community recycling guidelines.
- Share unused products with others (in a clearly labeled container).
- Participate in community hazardous chemical collection days.
- Think about how your actions could affect others.
- Be a neighborhood advocate for safe home management and product practices

Make Your Own Non/Low Toxic Household Cleaners

By making your own cleaning products, you can: promote a healthy environment, reduce chemicals going to landfills or incinerators, save money, eliminate cluttered cabinets, and easily prepare the right amount of cleaner for any job.

Follow these safety tips when making and using homemade cleaners:

- Ventilate the area.
- Wear gloves.
- Wear protective clothing and shoes.
- Avoid contact with skin and eyes.
- Store cleaners in labeled, non-food containers.
- Lock cleaners in a cabinet out of children's reach.
- Rinse surfaces thoroughly with water before applying a different product.
- Do not mix different products.
- Keep products away from heat, cigarettes, and flammable sources.
- Keep the telephone number of the nearest poison control center handy.
- Dispose of empty containers by following recycling instructions in your community.

Cleaning Supply List

These items can be purchased at most supermarkets and discount or hardware stores.

Products
Baking Soda
Chlorine Bleach*
Lemon Oil
Mineral Oil
Salt

Soap Flakes
White Vinegar
Whiting**
Supplies
Aluminum Foil
Bucket

Cleaning Cloths
Gloves
Measuring Cups

Measuring Spoons
Non-food Containers

* Chlorine bleach compounds are toxic to aquatic organisms in very low concentrations but are less toxic than many other cleaning products. Consider using chlorine as a cleaning agent only when necessary for heavy cleaning jobs.

**Whiting (calcium carbonate) is available at hardware and paint stores.

All Purpose Cleaners

- Mix 1/4 cup baking soda and 1 quart warm water. Wipe surface with sponge, then dry.
- Soap Jelly can be made by adding 1 cup of shaved soap flakes or leftover soap pieces to 1 quart of boiling water. Stir until dissolved. Pour into jar and let cool. Mix with water as needed.

Aluminum Cleaners

- Soak in a solution of 1/4 cup white vinegar to 1 quart water; boil if necessary.
- Soak in a solution of 2 teaspoons cream of tartar in 1 quart of water; boil if necessary.

Air Fresheners

- Open windows
- Circulate air with a fan or air conditioner
- Place cut lemons or baking soda in a dish
- Boil cinnamon and cloves in water

Bathroom Cleaners

- Mix 1/2 cup chlorine bleach and 1 cup water. Spray on tile to remove mildew. Let stand for ten minutes. Rinse with water.
- Mix 1/4 cup baking soda and 1 quart water. Wash with sponge, wipe dry.
- Remove tub stains by scrubbing with a paste of cream of tartar and hydrogen peroxide.
- Remove copper stains (green) by using salt and vinegar or salt and lemon juice.
- Remove lime deposits with vinegar.

Brass and Copper Cleaner

- Mix 2 tablespoons salt, 1 tablespoon lemon juice and 1 tablespoon vinegar. Rub with sponge and let dry. Rinse with hot water, then dry with soft cloth.

Chrome Cleaner

- Mix 1/4 cup baking soda with enough water to make a paste. Rub on, rinse with water, then dry.
- Apply whiting on a damp cloth.

Disinfectants

- Mix 1/4 cup bleach to 1 quart water
- Mix 1/2 cup borax to 1 gallon hot water.

Drain Cleaners

- Use drain traps.
- Pour boiling water down the drain.
- Use a plunger or plumber's snake.

- Mix 1/2 cup baking soda, 1/2 cup vinegar and 1/2 cup boiling water. Pour into drain. Let stand.

Floor Wax Remover

- Mix 3/4 cup dry detergent, 1 gallon hot water and 1/3 cup ammonia. Spread solution on a small area and let stand a few minutes. Scrub to remove wax. Rinse floor thoroughly. Let dry.

Furniture Polish

- Mix 1 teaspoon lemon oil and 1 pint mineral oil. Spray on furniture; wipe clean with soft cloth.
- Mix 1/4 cup linseed oil, 1/4 cup vinegar and 1/2 cup lemon juice. Rub into wood with soft cloth.

Household Insecticides (For Plants)

- Mix 1/2 teaspoon shaved soap flakes and 1 quart water. Wash leaves with soap solution, rinse with water. Large plants can be rinsed in the shower. (Do not use on plants located in low light.)

Marble

- Mix 1 tablespoon baking soda and 1 quart water. Wash with sponge, wipe dry.

Mothballs

- Store clean clothing in airtight chests or containers.

Oven Cleaner

- Make a paste of equal parts of salt, baking soda and water. Apply to walls of oven. Let stand for five minutes, wipe clean with a damp cloth. (Use a brush on heavy spills). Do not allow baking soda to touch wiring or heating elements.

Paint Brushes

- Place hardened paintbrushes in a bowl of hot vinegar for ten minutes. Rinse thoroughly.

Painted Surfaces

- Dust and vacuum surface before applying liquid solutions. Use a well-wrung cloth dipped in the cleaning solution. Starting from the baseboard, work upwards toward the ceiling to prevent streaking. Clean small areas at a time. Rinse with water, then dry.
- Mix 1/4 cup soap jelly (see all-purpose cleaners) and 1 gallon hot water. Wash walls with cloth dipped in this mixture.
- Mix four parts whiting to one part soap jelly to clean heavily soiled areas. Rub carefully on soiled areas. Rinse with water and let dry.

Refrigerator

- Mix 1/2 cup bleach and 1 gallon water. Wash refrigerator interior, wipe dry.

Silver Cleaners

- Line an aluminum pan with a piece of aluminum foil.
- Mix 1 teaspoon baking soda, 1 teaspoon salt and 1 quart hot water. Add silver and boil for three minutes. Remove silver, wash with detergent, rinse and dry. (Do not use on silver jewelry).

Toilet Bowl Cleaner

- Add 1/2 cup bleach to toilet. Let stand for a half-hour. Scrub bowl with brush and flush.

Upholstery Shampoo

- Mix 2 teaspoons mild detergent, 1 teaspoon water softener and 1 pint warm water. Whip into a foam with electric beater. Vacuum furniture. Test foam for color fastness in an inconspicuous area. Apply foam gently with a sponge or soft brush in a circular motion. Rub until foam disappears. Do not saturate fabric. Dry rapidly with fans.

Whiting

- Sprinkle whiting on surface. Rub with soft damp cloth to polish chrome or porcelain and remove metal marks on stoneware.

Window Cleaner

- Add 2 tablespoons vinegar to 1 quart warm water. Spray on windows and wipe dry.

(Source: Clean Water Fact Sheet, produced by Non-Point Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) and Sea Grant Connecticut)