



Cleaning without Toxins

By Wendy Marks
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Oh, the hubris I have as a natural health practitioner. I recently found out that the “green” cleaner I have been happily using in my kitchen for years is certainly a cleaner but in no way green. In fact it contains toxic chemicals. (I fell prey to the “green” on the label.) So I thought I’d do some homework and give you an overview for safe housecleaning, including some ideas for homemade cleaners, and products that I use in my home. I am extracting a great deal of my information from the wonderful site ewg.org. The mission of the non-profit Environmental Working Group is “to empower people to live healthier lives in a healthier environment.” Below is their (edited) summary regarding the harmful chemicals found in many household cleaners:

“EWG reviews and rates household cleaning products based on safety of their ingredients. Just seven percent of cleaning products adequately disclosed their contents. We researched ingredients and contaminants in 15 government toxicity databases and scientific articles.

EWG’s findings:

- Some 53 percent of cleaning products assessed contain ingredients known to harm the lungs. About 22 percent contain chemicals reported to cause asthma.
- Formaldehyde, a known human carcinogen, is sometimes used as a preservative or may be released by other preservatives in cleaning products.
- The chemical 1,4-dioxane, a suspected human carcinogen, is a common contaminant of widely-used detergent chemicals.
- Chloroform, a suspected human carcinogen, sometimes escapes in fumes released by products containing chlorine bleach.
- Quaternary ammonium compounds (“quats”) like benzalkonium chloride, found in antibacterial spray cleaners and fabric softeners, can cause asthma.
- Sodium borate, also known as borax, and boric acid are added to many products. They can disrupt the hormone system.
- Many leading “green” brands do not disclose ingredients adequately.

EWG recommends avoiding some products altogether because they're unnecessary or there are no safer alternatives. Among them:

- Air fresheners can trigger allergies and asthma.
- Antibacterial products can spur development of drug-resistant superbugs.
- Fabric softener and dryer sheet ingredients can irritate the lungs.
- Caustic drain cleaners and oven cleaners can burn eyes and skin. Use a drain snake or plunger in drains.

Natural doesn't mean non-toxic

Although plant-based ingredients don't use petrochemicals, some plant-derived substances can cause allergic reactions. Some chemicals used in "green" product lines have not been thoroughly tested.

The scarcity of solid data about risks associated with cleaning product contents underscores the need for reform of the federal Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976, to require safety testing of chemicals on the market.

Consumers have a right to know

Ingredient labels are mandatory for food, cosmetics and drugs – but not for cleaning products. Manufacturers aren't required to disclose all ingredients in their cleaners and many don't, including some "green" cleaners makers."

Ok, so what can we do that does not require us spending our entire life mixing up concoctions to clean with? (I admit I like the convenience of throwing a little packet in my laundry and walking away.) But homemade cleaners need not be complicated; here are a few easy and inexpensive natural recipes from wellnessmama.com for the more adventurous cleaner:

Vinegar Surface Cleaner: 1 cup distilled water. 1 cup white distilled vinegar. 1/2 lemon juiced (optional) 15 drops lavender or other essential oil.

Glass cleaner: Vinegar + water cuts through dirt and leaves glass streak-free.

Grout cleaner: 1 part water and 3 parts baking soda mixed into a paste. Apply to grout and let sit, scrub with toothbrush, remove with sponge.

Cookware cleaner: Use sea salt or coarse salt mixed with a little lemon juice and scrub. Also, try baking soda and water made into a paste. This also works well on stained tea cups or coffee mugs, and even the cutting board.

You get the idea... run with it. Note, though, that acids such as vinegar and citrus should not be used on sealed stone surfaces, as they damage the seal (that goes for Windex, too.) Warm soapy water, or a mix of 1/4 cup rubbing alcohol plus a few drops of dish soap in a spray bottle of water will clean those countertops.

And if you don't want to bother with DIY here are some of my favorites....

I'm not really sure how it works but microfiber cloths and mops with natural antibacterial function really do the trick in my kitchen. I started using them when I got those shiny stainless steel appliances that looked really great but instantly gathered fingerprints. Microfiber was the way to go and you can clean without water on many surfaces. They are really cheap to buy and last a long time. They also do a great job of polishing the screens of your electronic devices and glass cooktops.

There are a bunch of different citrus-based products that do everything from wash your sidewalls to Clear drains. I tend to keep some really strong stuff in the house. It works for toilets clogging, dishwasher cleaning, really heavy duty sticky stains, and as a huge bonus it also works if you're exposed to poison ivy, if you use it in a very diluted form. Citrasolve is my go to.

Dr Bronner's Sal suds concentrate for clothing and carpet stains.

Bon Ami Powder is good for tubs, showers, and sinks.

I use Dr Bronner's Liquid Castile soap for many things, in soap dispensers, and body wash... dilute it.

Ecover Zero is decent laundry soap.

General Home Environment

Dust and air filters are an important part of keeping your house clean. HEPA or similar type filters make a big difference in allergy response to toxins that are airborne. It might be a little much to have air cleaners everywhere in your house, but there's no excuse not to have one in your bedroom. A very smart allergist once told me that if you can get eight hours of sleep with your allergy stimulation

reduced, you will be much better during the day and need less allergy support in general. In short, the body heals at night.

But there is a secret to this. Buy a filter based on the size of your room, which is calculated by the manufacturer assuming that you leave the machine on 24 hours a day. In other words, it takes one whole day for your machine to filter the cubic feet of air in your room. So close the bedroom door and leave it running all the time. This is one case where a little extra use of energy means a whole lot better result. Get one that is Energy Star rated.

I would be remiss if I did not mention The use of HEPA vacuum cleaners. This can be especially important if you have carpeting and or pets. They dig a lot deeper and get a lot better result than a traditional vacuum cleaner. Some vacuums are sealed better than others (check out the Shark brand), so be aware that even its filter is HEPA, a vacuum may spew out the dust.

As many of you know I have for a long time kept a shoeless house. I don't want to gross you out by talking about the things that you bring in on your shoes, but you are bringing in many kinds of dirty things and often many kinds of pesticides. Do you really want to be breathing that stuff or getting it on your body or your children's bodies? If you don't like to be barefoot, have a pair of indoor shoes.

And lastly, you can now bring a knowledgeable data base to the market! There is an app called Healthy Living that you can bring to stores and it will tell you whether a product is a good value as a food or as a cleaning substance or anything else. It has a huge database and can be an amazing tool right on your phone. It's a free download to your phone. Created by EWG, and it scans too!

I know I've given you a lot to think about. And I hope you'll take it from here and think of doing some really clean Spring cleaning.

Namaste,

Wendy