



This Green Life

A Journal of Sorts



CLEAN ENOUGH

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I often think how strange it is that the most unnatural things can come to seem natural and even necessary if you live with them long enough.

Take household cleansers. In the 19th century, people cleaned with a few everyday materials, many of which were foods, like vinegar. Then the cleanser industry developed, giving us individualized cleaning products for virtually everything in the house -- floors, rugs, ovens, toilets, drains, windows, tubs, clothes, silver, brass and furniture. We got so used to these products over time that now we feel we can't clean without them.

It gets stranger. Almost all these cleaning products (except the ones made specifically for the green consumer) are composed of dangerous chemicals. The more innocuous ones can irritate your skin, make you dizzy or cause temporary breathing problems. The really scary ones can burn you, blind you, damage your organs or combust, if used improperly. Some may expose you to a greater risk of cancer and reproductive problems.

I first realized the danger some years ago, when I tried out a tub and shower cleanser and was nearly asphyxiated by the fumes. Consulting the label, I found a warning to use only in "well-ventilated places." (Could it have escaped the manufacturer's notice that tubs and showers are among the least well-ventilated places in the home?) Moving on to my other cleansers, I found that every one, without exception, bore a warning, ranging from mild to dire. Oddly, many also boasted that the product contained no phosphates, as if that were the green seal of approval, making everything else OK.

I'm sorry to say, I didn't immediately change my ways. Having bought into the idea that the products were necessary for cleaning, I continued to use them for quite a while -- mainly because I was scared the germs would hurt my kids. Eventually, though, I came to see that I was substituting one danger for another. The cleanser that killed the salmonella on our counter left a chemical residue that could harm our health in a different way, maybe not by itself, but in combination with the other chemicals in our environment and, increasingly, our bloodstream.

Synthetic chemicals -- of which there are more than 75,000 in use today -- have infiltrated every corner of our lives. They're in our carpets, clothes, cosmetics, baby bottles, toys, food packaging and vegetables. They can be found in the tropics and in the Arctic, in the air and in the ocean, in the bodies of both animals and people. Some are endocrine disruptors, like DDT and PCBs. What the rest may be, nobody knows. Less than 10 percent have been tested for safety.

I can't control my exposure to these chemicals in most areas of life, but I can when it comes to cleansers. So I steer clear of them, except for



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Signal words. The following regulated "signal words" on labels of household cleansers tell you how hazardous a product is. (When used on pesticide labels, the same words have slightly different meanings.)

POISON: highly toxic

DANGER: extremely flammable, corrosive or highly toxic

WARNING or CAUTION: mildly hazardous

It's best to buy products with no signal words, or only the words, "warning" or "caution."

Note that signal words only tell you about immediate dangers from misuse of the product, not about the possible long-term consequences of exposure.

Tips on accessories. If you make your own cleansers, buy new containers for them. There could be residues in the old containers that wouldn't mix well with the new ingredients.

Use old newspaper to clean your windows and mirrors. It doesn't leave streaks.

Use lint-free cotton rags for cleaning, and wash them frequently.



special needs. Instead, I use mainly baking soda and vinegar. The baking soda acts as the abrasive, and the vinegar as the antimicrobial agent. Perhaps vinegar's not as good a killer as the chemical stuff, but isn't that the point?

I don't mean to minimize the danger posed by germs, or the need to take care, especially in homes where people have weakened immune systems. But for a normally healthy family in 21st century America, household chemicals might pose just as great a threat as bacteria. Knowing as little as we do about their effects, it behooves us to be careful. When it comes to policy, this approach is called the "precautionary principle." In common language, it's known as being better safe than sorry.

—Sheryl Eisenberg

HOMEMADE CLEANSERS

Making homemade cleansers is more like cooking soup than baking cake. You don't need an exact recipe, just an understanding of the ingredients.

White vinegar is an acid with mild germicidal properties. It can be used to get rid of mold and mildew, cut grease and clean glass. (Put 1/4 cup in a spray bottle and fill with water.) Don't worry about the smell -- it dissipates quickly.

Lemon works much like vinegar, but takes more effort to use (you need to squeeze it).

Baking soda is a mild abrasive. It doesn't scratch surfaces (which creates more places for dirt to get stuck in) the way rougher scouring powders do. Baking soda also deodorizes. When I scrub with baking soda, I often use vinegar in place of the water, as the combination cleans more effectively.

Olive oil can add shine to wood furniture. Use a half teaspoon in a quarter cup of vinegar or lemon juice. Skip the mixture if you only want to dust. That just requires a damp cloth.

Salt cleans copper pots and pans. Use with an equal amount of vinegar, then rinse. It's also great for silver. Put a teaspoon in a pot with around 3 inches of water and a sheet of aluminum foil. Boil silverware in it for a couple of minutes. Then wipe off the tarnish with a clean cloth.

Hot soapy water kills food-borne germs! Use it to wash your hands, cutting boards, knives and any surfaces that have come in contact with raw meat or eggs. Wash for at least 20 seconds.

You can also use washing soda in place of baking soda for tough jobs (wear gloves), pure castile soap, non-chlorine scouring powder, and a variety of ready-made non-toxic cleansers made by ecologically minded companies.

Look for sponges that haven't been treated with an antimicrobial agent. (If you can't find any, try a natural foods store.) The use of antibacterial agents in cleaning products may contribute to antibacterial resistance, which could render antibiotics ineffective. Wash your sponges often in the dishwasher to keep the germs out.



Safe cleansers. It's not just the human residents of your house that will benefit when you use non-toxic cleansers. Your pets will be safer, too.

The Precautionary Principle.

"When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof. The process of applying the precautionary principle must be open, informed and democratic and must include potentially affected parties. It must also involve an examination of the full range of alternatives, including no action."

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Sheryl Eisenberg is a web developer and writer. With her firm, Mixit Productions (<http://www.mixitproductions.com>), she brought NRDC online in 1996, designed NRDC's first websites, and continues to develop special web features for NRDC. She created and, for several years, wrote the Union of Concerned Scientists' green living column, *Greentips*, and has designed and contributed content to many non-profit sites.

ONLINE RESOURCES

GRIST: Good, Clean Fun - <http://www.gristmagazine.com/possessions/possessions031803.asp>

NRDC: Chemical Pollution and Mother's Milk - <http://www.nrdc.org/breastmilk/default.asp>

WWF: Toxic Chemicals - <http://www.panda.org/campaign/detox/index.cfm>

EPA: Safe Substitutes at Home - <http://es.epa.gov/techinfo/facts/safe-fs.html>

THE GREEN GUIDE: Green Cleaners? - <http://www.thegreenguide.com/doc.mhtml?i=ask&s=cleaners>

GREEN SEAL: Choose Green Report - <http://www.greenseal.org/recommendations/CGR=GPCleaners.pdf>

HEALTH GOODS (commercial site): Hazardous Household Products - <http://tinyurl.com/36csc>

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH NETWORK: Precautionary Principle - <http://www.sehn.org/precaution.html>

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