

The Guide to Spring Cleaning

Spring has sprung, and the time has come to pop the windows open and clean away winter's dust and grime. Before you reach into the cabinet under your sink, consider the ingredients in your cleaning products, and make sure you're not replacing that dust and grime with chemical pollutants.

Most conventional cleaning supplies contain ingredients that are hazardous to people and the environment:

Chemical	Purpose/Use	Health Concern
Acetone	Found in spot treatment cleaners, mark and scuff removers, etc.	May cause liver and kidney damage and harm the developing fetus.
Bleach/sodium hypochlorite	Various uses including disinfectant.	Known eye, skin and respiratory irritant, suspected to be neurotoxic and toxic to the liver.
DEA (Diethanolamine)	Foaming and emulsifying ingredient in cleaners.	Suspected of causing cancer, and of being toxic to the respiratory and nervous systems.
Formaldehyde	Used in various products, including furniture polish.	Recognized carcinogen, suspected immunotoxin, neurotoxin, reproductive toxin, respiratory toxin, and skin irritant.
Fragrance (The term 'fragrance' can indicate the presence of up to 4,000 separate ingredients)	Scent in cleaners and air 'fresheners'.	Various health concerns with the thousands of chemicals 'fragrance' refers to. Many of these chemicals can affect the central nervous system, trigger asthma, and potentially cause cancer.
Napthalene	Pest repellent and deodorizer (registered pesticide).	Recognized carcinogen, suspected developmental, neurological and respiratory toxin.
Parabens	Preservative in a range of products.	Known hormone disruptors and suspected carcinogens.
Phosphoric Acid	Liquid dishwasher detergents, metal polishes, disinfectants, bathroom cleaners, especially those that remove lime and mildew.	Suspected neurotoxin and respiratory toxin.
Sodium lauryl sulfate	Lathering agent in cleaners.	Known skin irritant, suspected liver toxin.
Triclosan	Antibacterial/antimicrobial agent in a variety of products.	Suspected of weakening the immune system, disrupting hormones and causing cancer.
Xylene	Used in spot removers, floor polishes, ironing aids and other products.	Suspected developmental, neurological, reproductive and respiratory toxin.

(This list is not exhaustive, thousands of chemicals are used in cleaning products. This information has been compiled from the Guide to Less Toxic Products and Scorecard.org Chemical Profiles.)

Beware that in Canada manufacturers are not required to list ingredients on labels of household cleaning products. However, many companies using less-toxic ingredients are eager to make their ingredients known, and provide this information on labels or on information sheets or posters in stores.

Simplify and detoxify your cleaning routine—there's no need to clutter your closets and cupboards with dozens of bottles of chore-specific (and often toxic!) cleaners. Nearly everything you need to clean your windows, floors, toilet bowls, etc. can be found in some baking soda, vinegar, lemon, water and a little elbow grease. Baking soda is a great deodorizer and surface cleaner; vinegar helps kill bacteria, mould, and viruses; and lemon juice can cut grease when cleaning windows.

Recipes for homemade non-toxic cleaners

Ingredients: baking soda, vinegar, vegetable oil, lemon juice

All-purpose cleaner—Dissolve 4 tablespoons baking soda in one quart warm water, or use baking soda on a damp sponge.

Surface cleaner—mix together vinegar and salt.

Floor cleaner—A few drops of vinegar in a bucket of hot water. For wood floors, mix a one to one ratio of vegetable oil and vinegar into a solution and apply a thin coat. Rub in well.

Carpet cleaner—Sprinkle baking soda liberally over dry carpet, wait at least 15 minutes before vacuuming.

Furniture polish—Mix two parts vegetable oil with one part lemon juice. Apply and polish with a soft cloth.

Window and glass cleaner—Wash windows with a mix equal parts of white vinegar and warm water. Dry with a soft cloth.

Lime and mineral deposit remover—Hard lime deposits around faucets can be softened for easy removal by covering the deposits with vinegar-soaked paper towels. Leave the paper towels on for about one hour before cleaning.

Toilet bowl cleaner—Sprinkle baking soda into the bowl, then drizzle vinegar and score with a toilet brush.

Tub and tile cleaner—Apply vinegar full strength to a sponge and wipe surface first. Next, use baking soda as you would a scouring powder. Rub with a damp sponge and rinse thoroughly with clean water.

Drain cleaners—Pour ½ cup baking soda down the drain. Add ½ cup white vinegar and cover the drain if possible. Let set for a few minutes, then pour a kettle of water down the drain to flush. (Do not use this method if any commercial drain opener is still present.)

Not ready to start mixing up your own cleaning products? There are many companies that provide non-toxic cleaning products, including Ecover, Seventh Generation, and Nature Clean.

Not sure what to do with those old cleaners that you just don't use anymore (or are now concerned about using)? Don't dump them down the sink! Most municipalities have a household hazardous waste collection program that you should use to dispose of items that are corrosive (i.e. drain cleaners), flammable (i.e. turpentine), explosive (i.e. aerosol containers), and/or poisonous (i.e. cleaning fluids and pesticides).



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