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What Dangerous Chemicals Lurk in Your Home?

Most people use household cleaning products without even thinking about them being potentially dangerous substances. These include oven and drain cleaners, laundry soap, bleach, floor polish, paint and pesticides. Even arts and crafts supplies and yard care products can be hazardous.

Many household products can harm children, pets and the environment if not used and stored correctly. Toxic substances in these products can cause harm if inhaled, swallowed or absorbed through the skin. People respond to toxic substances in different ways. At high doses a toxic substance might cause birth defects or other serious problems, including brain damage or death.

To avoid problems, keep products in the containers they come in and use them exactly as the label says. Seek medical help if you swallow, inhale or get products on your skin.

According to the US Department of Agriculture, you can reduce your use of hazardous household products by choosing safer, less-toxic products such as vinegar, baking soda, corn starch or ammonia. Avoid household products with hazardous ingredients, or handle them with extreme care. Many toxic ingredients in paint thinners and drain cleaners, for example, can contaminate water sources. Here are some quick tips:

- ◆ Use only enough of the product to get the job done.
- ◆ Never dump hazardous products down drains, the toilet, or near flowing water, ponds, or lakes.
- ◆ Do not dump them on the ground.
- ◆ Use natural and less-toxic household products whenever possible.

The American Academy of Pediatrics states that national rates of injuries to children from household cleaning products have dropped considerably based on a recent study, but the number of injuries remains high. An estimated 11,964 injuries were treated in 2006 for children ages 5 years and younger. Bleach was the No. 1 product associated with injuries. Children aged 1 to 3 years, who are naturally curious and like to put things in their mouths, accounted for 72 percent of injuries. Products were typically ingested, most commonly from a spray bottle. Previous research and recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics suggest storing poisonous substances in locked cabinets, out of sight and reach of children, buying products with child-resistant packaging, keeping products in their original containers, and properly disposing of leftover or unused products.

If you, or someone you are with, has an accident or are exposed to a pesticide or household product you should look on the product's container for an emergency number to call for instructions and follow the safety tips below from the US Environmental Protection Agency.

- ◆ If someone splashes a household chemical in the eyes, rinse out the eyes for 15-20 minutes in the shower or under a faucet. Then call your poison control center at 1-800-222-1222. You can also call 911 or your local emergency ambulance number.
- ◆ If someone splashes a household chemical on the skin, take off the wet clothing and rinse the skin for 15-20 minutes in the shower or under a faucet. Then call your poison control center at 1-800-222-1222. You can also call 911 or your local emergency ambulance number.
- ◆ If someone drinks a household chemical, give them half a glass of water to drink. Then call your poison control center at 1-800-222-1222. You can also call 911 or your local emergency ambulance number.
- ◆ If someone inhaled a poisonous gas, quickly get the person to fresh air. Do not breathe the fumes yourself. Open all the doors and windows wide. Call your poison control center at 1-800-222-1222. You can also call 911 or your local emergency ambulance number.
- ◆ If someone is not breathing or won't wake up, call 911 or your local emergency ambulance number.

Be prepared for any emergency in your home. Keep your local emergency number, local ambulance number and the local poison control center telephone numbers on or next to your phone. All poison control centers now have the same telephone number. It is 1-800-222-1222.