



Spring cleaning: More than a clean house at stake

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Spring cleaning is not just a marketing ploy; it has been the tradition in many Asian cultures of creating a new start with the new year, which starts not on Jan. 1, but the start of spring. Back when we didn't have cleaning products sold to us off the shelf, our ancestors probably used simple things like vinegar and hot water to clean. Now, there is a movement to start going back to those ways, if not for nostalgia, for health reasons.

A national environmental health organization, Women's Voices for the Earth, has launched a spring cleaning campaign that teaches people how to make cleaners out of simple ingredients like baking soda, vinegar, olive oil and lemon, because recent scientific studies have shown that some chemicals in conventional cleaning products have been linked to asthma, reproductive harm and developmental disabilities (read their report, Household Hazards at www.womenandenvironment.org.) Even worse, cleaning products companies aren't required to list these chemicals on the label, so consumers have no way of avoiding chemicals to which they're sensitive.

More than 100 people have signed up to hold "Green Cleaning Parties" all over the country, as part of a grassroots coordinated effort by WVE. The parties use a 21st century tool, the Web, to get to people the old fashioned way: word of mouth — the modern day equivalent of Tupperware parties.

But unlike Tupperware parties of yore, there's a lot at stake for the success of this effort. Some participants of these parties, like Danbin Xu, a research assistant professor at the University of Washington, feel that without personal attention to this problem among minority communities, most would continue to put their health at risk.

"I feel that it would be even harder for minorities, or new immigrants to learn more about this problem, because many don't have access to this type of information," Xu says. "This is really a trigger point to discuss this problem with my friends and family, because a lot of us have concerns about this, but we don't really talk about it."

Kyoko Maruyama has experienced the dangers of chemical exposure first-hand, after she developed occupational asthma through exposure to chemicals in cleaning products at her work place at the University of Washington.

"I didn't know that I had asthma when I was working. When I consulted the university environmental safety office, they said there was nothing wrong, and my medical doctors didn't even suspect asthma, so I didn't try to initiate any change because I really did not know what was wrong. So in a way I felt powerless," Maruyama says.

"Now I know I am extremely sensitive to certain chemicals. In order to manage my asthma, I started to learn what was triggering my asthma attacks, and household chemicals were some of the strongest triggers. Now I use vinegar for my window and floor cleaner."

Maruyama thinks that many people say they have allergies, they get headaches, or sneeze, but don't know what the cause is, and don't suspect the chemicals they use in their house every day. This is especially true for people who don't speak English, because the research available on this topic is largely available in English.

The International District Housing Alliance is hoping to change that. They're partnering with Seattle Public Utilities to do outreach on safe cleaning products and indoor air quality. Their multi-lingual outreach workers do in-home assessments, look at what people are cleaning with and provide cleaning kits to members of Asian communities.

"Our environmental justice work is so closely linked to issues of social justice, and it's also tied to issues of poverty and economic justice," says Joyce Pisanont, director of community building programs at IDHA. "What we do is help people access the information they need so they can make safer choices for their families."

The freedom of choice is one of the reasons why Women's Voices for the Earth wants to raise awareness about the toxic chemicals in cleaning products. It's their belief that consumers should have the right to be able to avoid certain chemicals by looking at an ingredient listing on a product label, just as consumers are able to avoid certain ingredients in food products. That's why they're advocating for cleaning product companies to have full ingredient labeling on all of their products.

"There's so much excitement around green cleaning parties because people are concerned and confused about reports of toxic chemicals in products that they once trusted were safe," says WVE Executive Director Dori Gilels. "Until companies come clean about what they use in their products, we are encouraging people across the country to make their own."

Go to www.womenandenvironment.org/greenclean to find out how you can hold a green cleaning party of your own. When you get your downloadable party kit, it will include information on how to tell local elected officials to change policies requiring companies to disclose product ingredients.

Other resources: International District Housing Alliance (www.apialliance.org); Environmental Coalition of South Seattle www.ecoss.org.

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