

All-natural cleaners in the spotlight

Cleaning your house with commercial products really could be hazardous to your health

By NICKI LEFEVER

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All-natural cleaning products are becoming increasingly popular among consumers wishing to steer away from chemicals. (MCT)

Cleaning the bathroom can bring on the obvious pains of sore knees, aching elbows and nostril burn from the chemical smell.

But members of Women's Voices for the Earth, a national women-centered environmental health and justice organization based in Montana, are afraid that the problems that aren't so easy to

see is what can cause the real harm.

"There is a huge host of chemicals found commonly in cleaners with links to asthma and reproductive harm," said Alexandra Gorman Scranton, director of science and research for Women's Voices for the Earth.

Unlike food and cosmetics, cleaning product manufacturers aren't required to list ingredients. WVE studied five chemicals commonly found in household cleaners and published the report, "Household Hazards." The report questions the safety of those chemicals.

With the findings, the organization encourages women to make their own products, ask manufacturers to list their ingredients and replace toxic chemicals with less harsh alternatives.

There has also been movement from the commercial cleaners to lighten up their ingredients. Clorox launched Green Works, a line of natural cleaning products made with plant-based ingredients that are listed on the label.

Beth Thomason of East Berlin started using homemade natural cleaners 15 years ago. She said she got tired of that harsh smell of commercial household cleaners and started to research alternatives.

"I figured I'd just do it naturally with oils," Thomason said. "It's got to be better than using that other stuff."

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With a handful of herbs, white vinegar and some baking soda, Thomason can clean her whole house leaving behind the smell of lavender, rosemary or citrus.

And it doesn't stink.

"When I make glass cleaner I use vinegar and an herb, say lavender, to give it a nice smell," she said. "Just let it in seep in there for a week or so, it really gets the smell in there."

Thomason owns Thomason's Olde Thyme Herb Farm in East Berlin. She will lead a seminar on Herbal House Cleaning at 12:30 p.m. April 11 at the PA Herb Festival at the York Expo Center.

Most of the people that Thomason educates are genuinely concerned about the environment. Making their own cleaning products means less chemical exposure, less waste, less drain pollution and better health.

When Chris Clarke opened her Sunrise Soap Co. in York two years ago, she only sold all-natural soap. Since then, she's introduced green cleaning products, everything from toilet bowl cleaner to carpet shampoo. For 12 cents an ounce, customers can refill their plastic bottles of laundry detergent.

"It's reducing, reusing, recycling," she said.

She buys wholesale from GreenLine Paper Co. in York. The company, located on Pine Street in York, has been selling environmentally friendly paper and cleaning products since 1992.

"I went on a trip to Central America and saw the rain forest destruction," said president Steve Baker. "It inspired me to do something about it and make my contribution through my business."

The former computer salesman said the companies such as Earth Friendly Products and Sun and Earth started selling green cleaning products about 10 years ago, but more recently there has been renewed interest that he calls the "green wave."

More people are concerned about chlorine and other chemicals entering into rivers, bays and oceans through their drains, which has led to an increased demand for natural cleaning products Baker said.

And while less harsh hydrogen peroxide might not whiten as well as chlorine, Baker said his buyers can barely tell the difference. They're happy to make the switch.

"When we started, it was hard to find recycled products," he said. "Now the quality and availability is better."

Clarke read a statistic from Whole Foods that said the average person uses 12 personal products daily that contain 168 chemicals. Many of Clarke's customers are consumers who are tired of not knowing what's in these products and how they affect their health.

"I'm seeing a lot of mothers and grandmothers saying their babies have eczema," she said.

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When one of those customers started using the natural laundry detergent instead of the commercial brand, she said the baby's eczema was gone.

Most of the green cleaning products sold at Sunrise Soap Co. and grocery stores cost a bit more than commercial products, but Clarke said you get your money back in the long run with better health.

Scranton said when you make your own, it's more cost affective.

"When you buy a commercial cleaner, you are paying for the plastic bottle, the brand name, the advertising," Scranton said.

Clarke said the green products work just as well as the commercial products.

Interested in trying out your own cleaning products? Here are some recipes:

Make your own

All-purpose cleaners:

- Mix 1 teaspoon borax with 1 quart of warm water. Add a splash of lemon juice or vinegar to cut grease.
- Mix 2 teaspoons borax with 1 teaspoon soap in 1 quart water. Can be stored in a spray butter.
- Mix 3 tablespoons of washing soda (found in the laundry section of the store near the dry

bleach) per quart of warm water.

Air fresheners

- Place desired amount of baking soda in closed areas such as refrigerator and closets.
- Put 2 to 4 tablespoons of baking soda or vinegar in desired locations throughout rooms that need deodorizing.
- Boil cinnamon, cloves or your favorite spice.
- Burn matches or a candle.

Carpet deodorizers

- Sprinkle carpet with baking soda. Wait 15 minutes or longer and vacuum.
- Grind 4 tablespoons each of dried sage, juniper berries, lemon peel, mint, rosemary, cedar, savory, lavender and thyme in a coffee or spice mill or blender then mix with 2 cups baking soda and 4 teaspoons each of ground clove and cinnamon.

Disinfectant

- Mix ¼ cup borax in ½ gallon hot water

Drain cleaners

- Prevention is the best method. Use a drain strainer. Do not pour grease down the drain.
- For maintenance, pour about 1 gallon of boiling

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water down the drain weekly.

- Use a plunger or metal snake.

Floor cleaners

- For wood or vinyl floors, mix $\frac{1}{4}$ cup oil soap with 1 gallon of warm water.
- Use a mild detergent. Add a few drops of vinegar to help remove grease.

Copper

- Apply catsup; wash off quickly.

Silver

- Rub with paste of baking soda and water.
- Place a piece of aluminum foil to cover the bottom of a pan. Add 2 to 3 inches of water, 1 teaspoon baking soda and 1 teaspoon salt per quart of water and bring to a boil. Add silver pieces and boil two to three minutes. Make sure the water covers the silver pieces. Remove silver; rinse, dry and buff with a soft cloth.

Oven cleaner

- Prevention. Put a sheet of aluminum foil on the oven floor. Be careful not to touch the heating element. Clean up spills as soon as they occur.
- Mix 3 tablespoons of washing soda per quart of warm water. Spray on and wait 20 minutes. Scrub with a fine steel wool pad if necessary.

- Mix thoroughly, 2 tablespoons of borax, 2 teaspoons liquid soap and warm water. Put in spray bottle. Spray it on and leave for 20 minutes. Scrub with fine steel wool pad if necessary.

Tile/tub/toilet cleaner

- Use a detergent and cloth, or a stiff brush and either baking soda or borax.
- 2 cups baking soda plus 10 drops each of these essential oils: clove, cinnamon, sage, peppermint, lavender, pine, juniper, eucalyptus, thyme, lemon. Blend well.

Window and glass cleaners

- Mix one part water to one part vinegar in a spray bottle. Wipe off with clean cloth. If unusual streaking occurs during the first application, it's likely from the wax buildup from chemical cleaners. Remove wax with a little rubbing alcohol and clean again with solution.

Kitchen cleaner

- 2 cups baking soda plus 10 drops each of these essential oils: any citrus, rosemary, thyme, cinnamon. Blend with a mortar with pestle, or in a bowl (not plastic or wooden) with the back of a large metal spoon.

Furniture polish

- Mix three parts olive oil with one part citrus vinegar (to make citrus vinegar, use peels of

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oranges, grapefruits, lemons, limes or tangerines. Remove the zest, then thinly slice the peels and put them in a quart jar. Cover with white vinegar and let set for two weeks, then remove the peels, shake well and apply with a cotton cloth. Always shake well before using.

Source: Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences Cooperative Extension and Beth Thomason of Thomason's Olde Thyme Herb Farm in East Berlin

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CHEMICALS IN CLEANERS

Monoethanolamine (MEA): Found in some laundry detergents, all-purpose cleaners and floor cleaners and is a known inducer of occupational asthma.

Ammonium quaternary compounds : Found in disinfectant sprays and toilet cleaners that have been identified as inducers of occupational asthma.

Glycol ethers : Found in glass cleaners and all-purpose spray cleaners that have been linked to reduced fertility and low birth weight in exposed mice.

Alkyl phenol ethoxylates : Found in laundry detergents, stain removers and all-purpose cleaners, which have been found to reduce embryo survival in fish. They are commonly detected as contaminants in rivers and streams.

Phthalates : Carriers for fragrance in glass cleaners, deodorizers, laundry detergents and fabric softeners, which have been linked to adverse effects on male children, reduced sperm count in adult men and increased allergic symptoms and asthma in children.

Source: "Household Hazards" by Alexandra Scranton of Women's Voices for the Earth

ON THE WEB

--- www.womenandenvironment.org

--- www.greenlinepaper.com

--- www.cloroxgreenworks.com

--- www.greencleanbook.com

GREEN CLEANING PARTIES

Since the first day of spring, Women's Voices for the Earth, a national, women-centered environmental health and justice, has hosted a handful of parties to help women learn how to clean without harsh chemicals.

A group of friends can learn how to make non-toxic cleaners from common ingredients like vinegar, baking soda and essential oils. The party kit includes an educational DVD, a list of ingredients, labels and fact sheets.

For more details on how to host your own party, visit www.womenandenvironment.org.

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