



Toxics Use Reduction Institute

Tip Sheet

10 Ways to Find Safer Cleaners

Glowing customer endorsements, pictures of animals, or the color green on a label does not mean that a product is safe. Follow these 10 Tips so that you will be able to recognize and purchase safer and greener cleaners:

- 1. *Look for cleaners that have credible third-party certification.***
An example includes the Green Seal label (www.greenseal.org). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) also provides environmentally preferable product information at www.epa.gov/epp/tools/database.htm. If your store/supplier does not offer any of these products, ask the Manager when s/he intends to carry them. A letter signed by you and your neighbors/colleagues is a very effective way to elicit local support for the chemical companies trying to do the right thing.
- 2. *Find out if your state or region has a green procurement program (usually for government contract purposes).***
Visit www.newdream.org/procure/products/approved.php for a list of approved products, including for Massachusetts. Massachusetts also has an alternatives assessment laboratory as part of the Toxics Use Reduction Institute (www.turi.org) at UMass Lowell (www.uml.edu).
- 3. *Don't automatically disinfect when you clean.***
While disinfecting may be necessary on kitchen surfaces for preparing food or on telephones if someone is sick, it is best to limit the use of disinfecting products because overusing antimicrobial products may lead to the spread of 'super bugs.' Contact the Alliance for the Prudent Use of Antibiotics (www.apua.org) and the Center for Disease Control (www.cdc.gov/ncidod/op/cleaning.htm) for more information.
- 4. *Don't confuse fragrance with cleaning performance. If colors are used to differentiate cleaning products, these should be safe, too (such as those used for Food, Drug and Cosmetic purposes).***
Some people are chemically sensitive to these kinds of ingredients. Fragrances can also be used to mask odors that may be associated with an unsafe ingredient. Use unscented products wherever possible. Foodgrade colors are listed under EAFUS: A Food Additive Database maintained by the Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov).
- 5. *Be wary of salespeople who tell you that their product is safe when used as directed.***
This may mean that the cleaner could be considered dangerous when stored or handled as a concentrate. Products need to remain safe under all kinds of conditions for everyone coming into contact with them, including pets and children.

Did You Know That...

- Cleaning product manufacturers are not required by the U.S. government to identify ingredients on labels.
- In most cases, cleaning with soap and water is sufficient.
- You cannot disinfect a dirty surface. That is, a surface is not disinfected if debris remains after you clean (see Tip #3).
- Some chemicals used in liquid laundry detergents are suspected hormone disrupters (see Tip #6).

Quick Definitions

Antimicrobial products contain chemical agents that are capable of destroying or inhibiting the growth of microorganisms. These can be dangerous pesticides.

Hormone disrupters are chemicals that are suspected to interfere with normal hormonal processes, causing cancer, birth defects and immune problems.



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- Avoid using cleaners that contain these chemicals:**
Nonyl- and octyl-phenols are used to make alkylphenol ethoxylate (APE) detergents and are suspect hormone disrupters. In Europe, these products contain the slightly more expensive, but safer, alcohol ethoxylates instead.
- Look for labels that divulge ALL of the cleaner's chemicals.**
These labels are similar to those used on food stuffs whose ingredients total 100%. While companies participating in valid green labeling initiatives report all of their ingredients, many smaller firms selling safe products do not have funds for certification. Reading labels thoroughly can reward these companies, too, with your business.
- Contact the manufacturer of the cleaner(s) you are currently using and ask for the Materials Safety Data Sheet (MSDS):**
Their contact information should be somewhere on the label. To date, workers (not consumers) have a right to this information. Alternatively, try <http://hpd.nlm.nih.gov/index.htm> by the National Institutes of Health (NIH).
- Use only cleaners containing an HMIS¹ and/or NFPA² numerical rating listed on Material Safety Data Sheets.**
These ranking systems take into account a product's health, fire, reactivity and specific hazards, from a score of 0 (minimum) to 4 (severe) in each category. Displaying these values is not mandatory and constitutes a financial commitment for testing on the part of a chemical vendor to provide more data than just what is absolutely required by law. For bathroom, general purpose, glass and carpet cleaners, avoid any product with a score higher than 2 in any of the above categories.
- Stay away from cleaners that carry 'Danger' or 'Warning' statements. Remember, as a guideline:**

4	Danger	May be fatal on short exposure. Specialized protective equipment required.
3	Warning	Corrosive or toxic. Avoid skin contact or inhalation.
2	Warning	May be harmful if inhaled or absorbed.
1	Caution	May be irritating.
0	No unusual hazard	

For more information on the technical aspects and environmental and health impacts of cleaners, degreasers, solvents and their components, including household products, contact TURI Lab Director, Dr. Carole LeBlanc at 978-934-3249 or Carole_LeBlanc@uml.edu.

¹Hazardous Materials Information System.

²National Fire Protection Association (www.nfpa.org).

