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The dirt on green cleaning

Ecofriendly products, some homemade, get the job done safely

BY DAWN WEINBERGER

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Yes, the label on that family-sized bottle of household disinfectant tells the truth – it is tough on soap scum. It does kill 99.9 percent of germs. It even cuts tough grease quickly.

The problem? The disinfectant also is tough on the human body. So much for the supposed health benefits of a good spring cleaning.

Chemicals in cleaning products “emit gasses that are soaked up by the skin,” says Virginia Osborne, a naturopath and instructor at the Northwest College of Natural Medicine in Portland. “Then we absorb them and they can break down metabolic cycles.”

This breakdown can lead to everything from headaches and joint pain to nausea, dizziness and throat irritation. It even can contribute to the development of serious illnesses such as cancer and fibromyalgia, Osborne says.

“Mostly, it is a cumulative effect,” she says. “But there are times when it



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can be immediate.”



The annual spring cleaning ritual doesn't have to be a health hazard. Ecofriendly commercial products, as well as some homemade solutions, do the job just fine.



“Natural ingredients work really well,” says Annie B. Bond, author of “Clean and Green: the Complete Guide to Non-Toxic and Environmentally Safe Housekeeping.”



“They just take a little bit of adjustment.”



This might mean scrubbing a little harder or spending a little extra time with bucket and rag in hand. What it won't require: building up a huge arsenal of products and supplies.



Basic solutions work fine



Southwest Portland resident Jeanne Roy is in her 20th year of green cleaning. She cleans everything with vinegar and baking soda, and she does it weekly.



“I find that if I keep up and clean every week, it doesn't take as long,” Roy says.



Even those who aren't up for creating homemade solutions can get by with just a few basic supplies, explains Glenn Recchia, owner of GR Scrub, a year-old cleaning boutique in Sellwood.



He recommends purchasing a mild, nonabrasive and nontoxic cleaning powder (his favorite brand is Bon Ami), along with a biodegradable soap-based cleanser such as Dr. Bronner's Sal Suds. These two multipurpose products, along with an appropriate mop (go for the type with removable microfiber pads, he suggests), a good supply of cotton rags, a brush and a nonscratching sponge will take care of nearly every cleaning task.



“Cleaning should not be daunting if you have these tools,” Recchia says.

Be prepared to spend a little extra up front on the commercially produced green products, however. One 32-ounce bottle of Sal Suds costs nearly \$13 – quite a shocker for those used to dropping \$3 for a bleach-based liquid cleaner of the same size.

The difference? Many ecofriendly products are concentrated, so they last much longer than their traditional counterparts.

“The products sold in the supermarket ... are largely water, so (ultimately) you are paying a lot more for a product like that,” Recchia says.

As for the vinegar and baking soda Roy prefers, the financial benefits are obvious – both are inexpensive.

“I really do save a lot,” she says.

But green cleaning isn't about convenience, speed or saving a few bucks. The point, Bond says, is health.

“I think one of the main ways people pollute their homes is with cleaning products that are not (ecofriendly),” she says, adding that ingredients like baking soda and vinegar have been around so long that their safety is well-established.

Give it the sniff test

Patricia Uber, owner of Terraclean, a Portland-based ecofriendly cleaning service, says one of the most straightforward ways to determine the safety of a cleaning product is to simply use your sniffer.



“A strong chemical smell is one way to measure whether something could have harmful ingredients,” she says, explaining that our noses are trained to associate these unhealthy odors with cleanliness. “Once you realize they can be harmful, (the products) won’t smell so good anymore.”

A somewhat more scientific way to learn about the dangers of cleaning products is to visit www.scorecard.org. The Web site has information on all types of pollutants, and visitors can search for information on everything from ammonia to sodium hypochlorite, Bond says. (A few of the most dangerous, according to Osborne, include acetone, chloride, benzyl alcohol and ethanol.)

What you’ll discover: that bright-blue window cleaner that has a place in practically every American home is potentially dangerous to the liver, the nervous system and the reproductive system, among others (keep in mind, however, that the makers of traditional cleaning products do stand by their safety when the product is used according to package instructions).

All this can get confusing (what’s green? what isn’t?), so Uber breaks it down this way – truly green cleaning products are made without volatile organic compounds and do not contain known toxins. If the product is plant-based, that’s even better. And if a local company makes it, that’s better still (Uber uses Bi-O-Kleen products, manufactured in Vancouver, Wash.).

Most important, don’t assume that a product is green or ecofriendly just because the label says so, says Larry Chaflan, executive director of the Zero Waste Alliance in Portland.

“There have been some products with green in their name that were hazardous,” Chaflan says, pointing out that it is up to the consumer to read labels and make wise product choices. “But improvements have been made.”

Concerned about all the super-oxy bleach you’ve used over your lifetime?

The best course of action, Osborne says, is to make the switch to green cleaning now. Also, take actions that help eliminate toxins (drinking lots of water and sitting in a sauna, for example) and if there is a concern, see a health care provider. “We don’t want to frighten (people), but we want them to be educated so they can make better choices for their families,” she says.

Resources

- The Web site www.care2.com has a wealth of information on green cleaning, including tips and recipes for homemade solutions.
- GR Scrub: 8235 S.E. 13th Ave. No. 12, 503-236-8969, www.grscrub.com
- Terraclean: 503-293-5355, www.terracleanworld.com
- Bi-O-Kleen: 800-477-0188, www.bi-o-kleen.com

Make your own solution

Jeanne Roy of Southwest Portland rarely buys cleaning supplies, even the ecofriendly kind.

Instead, she swears by vinegar and baking soda, along with a few other nontoxic items.

One of her favorite all-purpose recipes, courtesy of the Northwest Earth Institute, where she serves as a volunteer, is to combine one quart of warm water with one teaspoon each of liquid soap, borax and vinegar in a spray bottle.

The solution, according to NWEI, safely cleans countertops, floors, walls and upholstery.

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