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EcoConsumer

Clean with conscience

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Does it ever seem like the cleaning products under your sink are breeding?

Those bottles and boxes of cleaners we all have in the kitchen, the garage, or the basement sure add up. Americans generate 1.6 million tons of household hazardous waste per year (which also includes other items, such as pesticides), and the average home accumulates as much as 100 pounds of household hazardous waste each year, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Becoming more eco-friendly with your household cleaning is one of the easiest ways to reduce toxics in your home. It may also save you money, because many less-toxic alternatives are also less expensive.

Household cleaning products often contain chlorine, phosphates, petroleum-based substances and other ingredients that can harm the environment in their production, use or disposal. Chemicals in cleaners can aggravate asthma and allergies. And household cleaning products were responsible for 211,000 calls to poison centers in the U.S. in 2003, says the American Association of Poison Control Centers. More than half of those poison-exposure cases involved children under age 6.



HEATHER MCKINNON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Green cleaning sources

Consumer Reports — Green

Cleaning : www.greenerchoices.org
(under "Home & Garden")

Local Hazardous Waste

Management Program in King County (disposal locations and safer alternatives):

www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house,
206-296-4692

National Household Products

Database :

www.householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov

Washington Poison Center :

www.wapc.org, 800-222-1222

Washington Toxics Coalition:

www.watoxics.org

The three most dangerous cleaning products in the average home are drain cleaners, oven cleaners and acid-based toilet-bowl cleaners, according to Philip Dickey of the Washington Toxics Coalition. He notes that some cleaning products may look or smell a lot like food to a small child. For example, the containers for popular brands of chlorine cleanser and parmesan cheese look amazingly similar.

Products labeled "Danger" or "Poison" pose the greatest hazard. Try to avoid those. "Caution" or "Warning" means moderately hazardous. The safest products have none of those four words on the label. Read directions carefully, to make sure you don't use more than needed. Store all cleaners safely away from children and pets.

Finding effective substitutes for hazardous products has become much easier in recent years. Nearly every supermarket now carries at least a few alternative, less-toxic cleaning products. And the Internet has abundant recipes and resources to make nontoxic alternative cleaners at home, which can save you money. Many people get excellent results from homemade cleaners, using common products such as lemon juice, vinegar and baking soda.

Many cleaning products no longer contain phosphates, which can harm waterways, but the major brands of automatic dishwasher detergents still use them. Two brands without phosphates, Seventh Generation and Trader Joe's, will clean your dishes just as well and are fairly economical, says Consumer Reports.

You might use some brands of cleaners out of habit, or because your parents used them — popular brands of window cleaner with ammonia, or chlorine cleanser, for example. But at my house, when we switched from the main brands to products without the ammonia or the chlorine, we couldn't tell the difference.

If you live with other people, try to enlist their support before you switch to less-toxic products or methods, especially if they share the cleaning.

When you need to dispose of hazardous cleaning products or other household toxics, check with your city or county to find the nearest household hazardous-waste-collection center, or the next scheduled collection event. King County and other local governments have expanded the collection of household hazardous waste in recent years. And, unlike most other waste collection, there's no charge when you bring it in.

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