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Clean and green: Household chemicals are best avoided

Let's get down and dirty by answering some common questions about green household cleaning, especially for the most challenging tasks.

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Do we really need dimethyl imidazolidinedione, whatever that is, to clean our showers?

Yes, that's a real product ingredient. But we can do most cleaning at home just fine without using products made from questionable chemicals with unpronounceable names.

Alternatives include vinegar, lemon juice, baking soda or simply water for basic cleaning of surfaces such as windows or floors. But what about those really tough cleaning jobs?

Let's get down and dirty by answering some common questions about green household cleaning, especially for the most challenging tasks.

Q: What's wrong with using chemical products for tough cleaning chores?

A: Possibly nothing, if you're sure they are the best products for the job and you handle them properly. But don't use chemical products indiscriminately.

Chemicals in some cleaning products may lessen your indoor air quality, cause an allergic reaction or pose a safety hazard.

Avoid products such as drain cleaners with "Danger" or "Poison" printed on the label, because that means they are potentially hazardous. It's best not to keep those in your home.

Q: How can I find out what's in cleaning products?

A: Under current federal law, it's nearly impossible to determine all the chemical ingredients in products and how safe they are. Manufacturers are not required to disclose most ingredients.

The U.S. government does maintain a Household Products Database (hpd.nlm.nih.gov) that gives toxicity and safety information for product ingredients voluntarily divulged by manufacturers.

If someone in your household has chemical sensitivities, check the ingredients in the database before buying a product. If the database doesn't list its ingredients, don't buy the product.

Q: What's a good overall strategy for handling tough cleaning jobs?

A: Don't let a small cleaning task become a big, harder-to-clean one. Deal with clothing stains or food messes when they happen. As a seasonal example, quickly clean your backyard grill after each use. Scrub the grate while it is still slightly warm, using a wad of used aluminum foil or half of a lemon.

Allow yourself time to experiment with less toxic store-bought cleaning products or homemade cleaners. If you leave a tough cleaning job to the last minute, chemical-laden cleaning products will usually seem like the easiest option.

If you use a cleaning service, ask them to go as green as possible. Many local cleaning services know how to use greener cleaning products effectively, even on hard jobs.

Q: What about tough clothing stains?

A: Be sure to deal with stains before you put clothes in the dryer. Heat sets stains and makes removing them futile.

In their new book, "Homemade Cleaners," authors Dionna Ford and Mandy O'Brien recommend hydrogen peroxide for removing blood stains on light-colored clothing, and vodka for ink stains.

Plenty of additional environmentally friendly stain-busting ideas can be found online or in other books. Test different approaches to learn what works best for your clothes and your most common stains.

Q: How about polishing silver?

A: Steer clear of silver polishes with an extremely strong smell, and keep in mind that spray polishes may contain flammable chemicals. One popular liquid polish, SilverMate, works as a dip and can be reused indefinitely, which is a plus. Homemade methods involving baking soda, for instance, may also work.

Q: I have trouble getting soap scum off shower walls and glass shower doors. Any ideas?

A: On its housecleaningcentral.com website packed with green cleaning tips, the Redmond-based Mrs. Clean housecleaning service recommends several options for soap scum, including white vinegar, baking soda and borax.

As with many other household cleaning problems, soap scum can be handled much more easily when it's fresh, rather than aged and caked on like concrete.

Q: Is going green for tough household cleaning jobs always going to be harder than just using a chemical spray?

A: It may take a little effort to come up with the best green cleaning method, but finding effective chemical products for those challenging jobs can be just as hard.

No one loves to clean, but you'll feel better about it when you keep the heavy-duty chemicals to a minimum.

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