Choosing safer products to clean and sanitize your home

Many common household cleaning products contain chemicals that can harm your body. Some of these chemicals can:

- cause or trigger asthma.
- cause cancer.
- irritate or chemically burn your lungs and skin.
- interfere with the functioning of your liver and other organs.
- affect your reproductive system.
- affect the health of unborn babies.

The risk of experiencing these health effects depends on:

- how hazardous the product is and how concentrated it is.
- how often the product is used.
- the amount that gets into your body.
- the age, health and gender of the person using the product.

What Can You Do?

Be a label reader. Begin by reading the labels of the products used regularly. Manufacturers are not required to list ingredients on household products. However, signal words (described below) and symbols or pictograms on the label can tell us how toxic a product is. The signal words for cleaning products are:

DANGER – tells us that the product is more hazardous.
WARNING – tells us that the product is less hazardous.

The signal words for disinfectants are: CAUTION, WARNING and DANGER. Look for a signal word of CAUTION.

Sometimes there is a symbol or pictogram on the label that gives us additional information. Here is a pictogram that warns that a product contains a carcinogen (causes cancer) or a respiratory tract irritant.

Avoid the following:

- products packaged in aerosol containers.
- Aerosol sprays create a fine mist that stays in the air and is able to go deeper into the lungs than the mist made by spray bottles that make a stream instead of a mist. This fine mist increases your exposure to the chemicals.
- products with added fragrances.
- products containing disinfectants (unless specifically used for disinfecting).

Shop for products in grocery and retail stores that fully disclose all ingredients and are:

- certified by a third-party certification organization (Design for the Environment Disinfectants Program (DfE), Safer Choice, Green Seal, or UL ECOLOGO®.)
- packaged in pump-spray bottles, not aerosol cans.
- packaged in recyclable containers.
Avoid products that list these ingredients:

- 2-butoxyethanol (or ethylene glycol monobutyl ether) and other glycol ethers
- Alkylphenol ethoxylates (some common ones are: nonylphenol and octylphenol ethoxylates, or octoxynols)
- Bisphenol A
- d-Limonene
- Dyes (may be listed as FD&C or D&C)
- Ethanolamines (common ones to look out for are: monoethanolamine [MEA], diethanolamine [DEA], and triethanolamine [TEA])
- Fragrances
- Parabens
- Phthlates
- Pine or citrus oil
- Quaternary ammonium compounds (look out for these: alkyl dimethyl benzyl ammonium chloride (ADBAC), benzalkonium chloride, dodecyl-dimethyl-benzyl ammonium chloride; lauryl dimethyl benzyl ammonium chloride; benzyl-C10-16-alkyldimethyl, chlorides; benzyl-C12-16-alkyldimethyl, chlorides; benzyl-C12-18-alkyldimethyl, chlorides; benzyl-C16-18-alkyldimethyl, chlorides; and didecyl and didecyl dimethyl benzyl ammonium chloride)
- Bleach or sodium hypochlorite

Resources
Look up your cleaning products on the following websites:
UL ECOLOGO® Certification
EPA Design for the Environment Disinfectants Program
EPA Safer Choice
Green Seal
Environmental Working Group’s Guide to Healthy Cleaning
Women’s Voices for the Earth – Information on what’s in specific cleaning products and recipes for making your own less-toxic cleaner. Available here.