

How do we know what's in the products we're using?

There are hundreds of products to choose from in buying household cleaning supplies. How do you know what's in them?

Actually, it's a lot harder for Canadians than it is for our neighbours to the south. American regulations in most states provide for product labelling that outlines the main ingredients in the product.

It's better for products used in the Canadian workplace. The federal government's Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) legislation states that worksites must have a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) on site for every product used.

Some environmentally-friendly products, such as those manufactured by Seventh Generation and Ecogent, do make it a practice to disclose their ingredients, setting a model for what should really be the standard.

CONSUMERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

There public really should be entitled to know what toxins they may be exposed to in household products. But until we get there, informed consumers can make a big difference.

The best place to start in learning about what you're using is product category. There certainly are exceptions but most hand soaps and liquid dish detergents are fairly safe. So are most fabric softeners.

Other products can be quite variable. Laundry soaps can contain the carcinogen trisodium nitrilotriacetate, for example. Some powdered abrasive cleaners can contain silica, another carcinogen.

The products to watch particularly carefully for haz-

ardous ingredients such as carcinogens and reproductive toxins include carpet stain removers, paint strippers, tile cleaners and graffiti removers.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

First, check the product label. Although there's usually not much ingredient information there, some ingredients such as the carcinogen trichloroethylene and the reproductive toxins xylene and toluene may be listed as hazards. Stay away from those products.

Phone the 1-800 questions and comments number that's printed on most products sold today. Some companies will supply a material safety data sheet on demand and the more that people phone up and ask for them, the more likely they are to offer them on-line — and possibly even agree to product labelling.

Finally, there are some on-line resources where you can get more information hazardous ingredients. One of the largest lists is provided by Wal-Mart covering the many products it sells. It's not certain how often the store updates its MSDS list, which is based on U.S. standards, but it does provide a lead on product ingredients. Some other sites are listed below.

SITES WITH CONSUMER PRODUCT INFO

www.malcopro.com/cgi-win/malmsds.exe/L_Consumer

www.herc.org/library/msds.htm

msds.walmartstores.com/

msds.johnsondiversey.com/CA/emsds/msds_ca_inst_e_int.asp

What toxins should we be most concerned about?

CARCINOGENS

Occupational health manuals define a carcinogen as a substance that “causes an increased incidence of benign or malignant neoplasms.”

If you sort through all the scientific language and the bottom line is that carcinogens are substances that can cause cancer. They do it by altering or damaging cell DNA—the basic coding system of cells.

That DNA damage can then lead to the uncontrolled cell growth that we call cancer.

Over the last half century various agencies have been established that study carcinogenic substances, includ-

ing the International Agency for Research on Cancer and California’s Proposition 65. They have drawn up extensive lists of potential carcinogens. In many industries, unions and other groups have used those lists to wage campaigns to reduce workers’ exposure to such carcinogens as asbestos fibres and coke dusts.

Still, a number of carcinogens show up in common household products where they are not necessary and where they can potentially cause harm. They may only be in small amounts, but over time, the cumulative effect can lead to cancer.

Wherever we can we should stop using products that contain carcinogens.

REPRODUCTIVE TOXINS

Reproduction and fetal development are such finely-balanced processes, it’s not surprising that many chemicals can disrupt them. Reproductive toxins can cause damage in a number of ways — from lowered sperm counts in men to infertility in women. Some chemicals are also development toxins that can cause damage to

the developing fetus or cause learning disabilities in children.

Fortunately, not a lot of reproductive and development toxins are found in household products. But there are some, including a chemical known as 2-butoxyethanol, that appear in a number of spray cleaners, window cleaners and other products. It’s definitely an ingredient to avoid.

ENDOCRINE-DISRUPTING CHEMICALS

Many cleaning products we use everyday contain chemicals known in the scientific world as “endocrine-disrupters,” or EDCs. They’re chemically similar to the hormones naturally produced by humans and others in the animal world produce and because of that, they tend to “disrupt” the actions of those hormones.

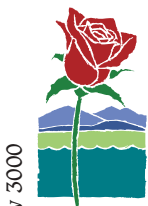
Sometimes they block the natural hormones and sometimes they increase their effect, with unpredictable results. In the Columbia River area, for example, river otters exposed to endocrine-disrupting chemicals have penises that are so small they are unable to mate. Birds are born with deformed beaks that prevent them from eating.

Researchers aren’t sure what the relationship is between EDCs and cancer, but a lot of research is

underway right way. At the University of B.C., for example, investigators are looking into the possibility that EDCs in pesticides and cleaning products may initiate the first in a cascade of changes that can eventually lead to cancer, including breast and prostate cancer.

What we do know for sure is that EDCs can have an enormous impact on the environment, causing reproductive damage in many species, including salmon.

Fortunately, as a result of the work done by environmentalists over many years, changes may be coming under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. The change would involve banning one of the largest group of EDCs — known as nonyl phenols and their ethoxylates —from all cleaning products over the next five years. In the meantime, avoiding products that contain EDCs, especially nonyl phenols, is the best choice.



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