

Natural items make better cleaning products

By Leigh Jones

The Daily News

Published August 1, 2008

Household cleaning products can be hazardous to more than just dirt and germs.

Many common household cleaners and air fresheners emit toxic pollutants that can create health risks, especially with repeated exposure, according to a 2006 study by University of California, Berkeley researchers.

As the green movement grows, both established corporations and new, environmentally friendly companies have started to offer chemical-free cleaning products, safe for people, pets and the environment.

But experts say if consumers really want to be green, they can make their own cleaning supplies from items commonly found in the kitchen pantry.

“If it’s too dangerous to touch, it can’t be clean,” said Danielle Downs, spokeswoman for EcoDiscoveries, an Atlanta-based producer of natural home cleaners.

Product labels often contain warnings about how harmful the sprays, gels and scrubs can be if swallowed, inhaled or even touched, which makes it odd people are still convinced they should take those items into their homes, she said.

Labels can be difficult to decode without a chemistry degree, but looking out for a few key words can save shoppers from taking unwanted toxins into their homes, said Lauren Brownell, author of “Zen and the Art of Housekeeping.”

Ingredients to avoid include petrochemicals, ammonia, chlorine, phthalates and volatile organic compounds.

Also, beware of incomplete lists of ingredients, Brownell said. Manufacturers often hide secret formulations by using the phrase “other ingredients,” which can be a convenient way to hide what’s really in a product, she said.

Although consumers can take lists of toxins with them to help decode labels, it's easier to use the syllable rule, said Cloud Conrad, vice president of brand strategies for Maid Brigade, a cleaning service that only uses green products.

If you can't pronounce it, or if it has too many syllables, put it back, she said.

While environmentalists applaud the increase in "green" cleaning products on store shelves, they also warn consumers to beware of "greenwashing," eco-friendly claims that aren't substantiated.

Recent studies by the Organic Consumers Association raised questions about the claims on a number of "green" products, giving credence to experts who say 100 percent natural is the only way to go.

Effective and safe cleaning products can be created using things like white vinegar, lemons and lemon juice, baking soda, olive oil and washing soda, said Lisa Beres, a building biologist and green building professional.

Baking soda is a common deodorizer that can be sprinkled on carpets before vacuuming, Brownell said. It can also be used as a scouring scrub for sinks and bathtubs, she said.

Brownell also recommends rubbing half a lemon on soap scum or hard water deposits.

Beres, who owns GreenNest.com, advises using 100 percent food-grade essential oils to add fragrance to any homemade cleaning products. The oil is expensive but very concentrated, so a few drops go a long way, Beres said.

Olive oil can be used as a furniture polish, and borax is a disinfectant that inhibits mold growth, Beres said.

+++

Cleaning Product Recipes

All-purpose cleaner

Half teaspoon washing soda, a squirt of liquid soap, two cups of hot water. Combine in a spray bottle.

Mix white vinegar and water in a 1-1 ratio. Put in a spray bottle.

Furniture polish

Half a teaspoon of olive oil, half a cup of white vinegar or lemon juice. (Don't use on anything with a finish.)

Toilet cleaner

One quarter cup of vinegar and one quarter cup of borax.

Soft scrub

Mix enough dishwashing liquid with a half cup of baking soda to make a paste

Fabric softener

Add one-quarter cup of vinegar into the rinse cycle. Don't do this if using bleach.

Drain cleaner

Put a half cup of baking soda down drain first, followed by a half cup of vinegar. Flush with hot water after the mixture stops bubbling.

Spray starch

One tablespoon of cornstarch in 2 cups of water. Shake it up in a spray bottle before using it.

Natural "sponge"

Cut a lemon in half, sprinkle it with baking soda and rub it on dishes.

Dryer sheets

Mix one part liquid fabric softener with two parts water and spray a dry, clean washcloth with the mixture.

Recipes courtesy of

Lauren Brownell and Lisa Beres

+++

Avoid These

Ammonia

Chlorine

Petrochemicals (ethylene, propylene, benzene, benzol, annulene, phenyl hydride, diethanolamine, triethanolamine, monoethanolamine, xylene)

Tetrachloroethylene

Amyl acetate

Naphthalene

Methylene chloride

Copyright © 2008 The Galveston County Daily News