

Striving for Chemical-Free Zones

Making your home safe haven? Choose the right cleaning products.

- Try cleaning with just water and microfiber cloths. Many name-brand glass cleaners contain harmful chemicals including ammonia, a powerful eye, skin, throat and lung irritant. You may think adding vinegar to water gives you a better clean—the residue it leaves will attract dust.
- Check the label and get one with the fewest ingredients (e.g., many name-brand laundry detergents are filled with harmful foaming agents and countless, untested fragrance chemicals).
- Avoid dusting sprays. Even though they may seem like a quick cleaning solution; many dust cleaners contain allergy-inducing and even hormone-disrupting chemicals.
- Line-dry your laundry or use dryer balls made of wool. Dryer sheets, fabric softeners and typical clothing sprays can be loaded with chemicals that are potentially harmful to you and your family? It's true! These chemicals come into contact with your bedding, towels and clothing—which then covers your skin for hours at a time—the risks can be high.
- Avoid synthetic fragrances. "Fragrance" is often a convenient category allowed by regulatory agencies and used by major manufacturers to cloak a variety of harmful chemicals, like [phthalates](#), so the public remains unaware. The best advice is to scan labels and look for natural fragrances or none at all. Remember, clean has no smell!
- Avoid synthetic dyes. Dyes have been known to trigger chemical sensitivity, resulting in contact dermatitis, stuffy noses, headaches and other symptoms. Look for products that contain no dyes. While it may seem strange that a laundry product would contain a dye, you'd be surprised. Ingredients like the food coloring Red 40 Lake are found in Downy Wrinkle Release spray, and Liquitint™ Blue can be found in detergents like Tide HE.
- Avoid parabens, including butylparaben, ethylparaben, isobutylparaben, methylparaben and propylparaben—some researchers have expressed concern about these chemicals, used as preservatives in not only laundry products but also personal care products. They have been shown to mimic estrogen and have been found in breast cancer tumors. Scan your labels to make sure your laundry products don't have these ingredients.
- Don't use commercial wet wipes. Flushed wet wipes can clog pipes and sewers, creating tons of harmful waste. Wet wipes made from plastics, wood pulp and cotton are difficult to break down and can float in sewers and oceans for years. In fact, wet wipes have become the fastest-growing pollution on beaches. Chemicals in some wet wipes can cause serious skin allergies, like dermatitis and eczema. Some baby wipes contain bronopol, an antimicrobial that can release low levels of formaldehyde. Formaldehyde is a volatile organic compound known to cause eye and throat irritation, headaches and dizziness, and has been classified as a human carcinogen by the EPA.

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Breathing Easy? Thank a Houseplant! Avoid these most common indoor air pollutants:

- Ozone (Bad ozone in the troposphere or ground level)

Ozone is one of the main components of outdoor air pollution, but it can also sneak its way into homes and offices (where people spend the majority of their time).

Sources of indoor ozone pollution include copy machines, laser printers, UV lights and (ironically) electrostatic air purification systems. According to the EPA, ozone is “good up high, but bad nearby.” In other words, stratospheric ozone is protective, since it helps filter the sun’s damaging UV radiation. But ozone in the atmosphere—the air we breathe—can be harmful to the respiratory system, causing or aggravating asthma, throat irritation, coughing, chest pain and more.

In addition to removing ozone:

- Spider plants also help reduce carbon monoxide, as well as volatile organic compounds like benzene, formaldehyde and xylene, a solvent used in the leather, rubber and printing industries.
- Snake plants (aka mother-in-law’s tongue) also help filter out formaldehyde, an ingredient in in some cleaning products as well as tissues, toilet paper and personal care products.
- Golden pothos is another powerful plant for fighting formaldehyde, and since it’s fast-growing it can green up your home in a flash! The plant has a multitude of common names including golden pothos, hunter’s robe, ivy arum, money plant, silver vine, Solomon Islands ivy and taro vine. It is also called devil’s vine or devil’s ivy because it is almost impossible to kill. It is sometimes mistakenly labeled as a Philodendron in plant stores. It is known as money plant in Nepal, India and Bangladesh.¹

- Carbon Monoxide

This odorless, invisible gas prevents your body from properly using oxygen. It can cause headaches, nausea, dizziness, confusion and a rapid heart rate. If it’s concentrated enough, it can even be lethal. To reduce your risk of carbon monoxide poisoning, make sure your heating system has been installed correctly and have it checked annually. Avoid heating your home with a gas stove, and consider buying a CO detector. Carbon monoxide is lighter than air so it rises. Make sure your detector is placed up high.

- Formaldehyde and Other VOCs

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are compounds released when fuels like gasoline, diesel, coal, natural gas or wood are burned. VOCs are also released from paints, glues, solvents and other products used and/or stored indoors. Examples of VOCs include such compounds as benzene, diesel exhaust particulates, formaldehyde, perchloroethylene, styrene and xylene, among others.

The known health effects of VOCs on humans vary from highly toxic to none at all. Benzene and formaldehyde are listed as human carcinogens by the National Toxicology Program. Others, such as diesel exhaust particulates, perchloroethylene and styrene are listed as “reasonably anticipated to be human carcinogens.” Inhaling VOCs can cause nausea and breathing difficulty, and they can also irritate the eyes, nose and throat and cause damage to the central nervous system and other organs.

To protect yourself and your family from VOCs, look for “low VOC” on paint and building supply product labels. Keep all indoor areas well ventilated, and allow new carpet and/or building products to off-gas outside first before installing them.

And, in addition to the plants mentioned above, the following are also helpful for purifying the air in your home:

- Aloe vera helps filter out formaldehyde and benzene.
- Bromeliad, Caribbean tree cactus, dracaena and jade plant are also known to remove VOCs from indoor air.

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How to Use Essential Oils

- Try adding a few drops of your favorite blend to a spray bottle filled with water. Simply spritz the mixture around your house to freshen the air and provide an uplifting, refreshing scent.
- Or add a few drops of essential oil to a pot of water on your stovetop and let it simmer on low heat. The soothing scent will soon permeate throughout your house. (Remember to keep adding water and essential oil as the water evaporates.)
- You can use your essential oils with water as you're cleaning surfaces around your home. Add six drops to ten ounces of water in a spray bottle and grab a good microfiber cloth to get counters, bathroom surfaces, glass and more not only clean but smelling fresh too.
- Add a few drops to two woolen dryer balls and toss into your dryer for naturally scented laundry.
- A few drops of essential oil applied on a cotton ball or two work well in your vacuum's canister to cleanse the air and make your whole house smell fresh as you vacuum.
- Try stashing a few of these cotton balls in drawers or closets to keep closed-off areas fresh.
- You can even make your own essential-oil-and-baking-soda deodorizer to absorb odors as it also helps scent your home. Just combine 1/4 cup of baking soda with 40 drops of your favorite essential oil and mix well. Stir the mixture daily to release the oil's scent. Use it up to 30 days, adding a few drops of essential oil if the aroma begins to fade.
- When it comes to products labeled "natural" or "organic," it's important to read labels and look for products that are certified by reputable agencies, such as EcoGruppo, NATRUE, Ecocert® and BDIH. Why? Because these agencies have strict rules about what goes into the products they certify.



EcoGruppo guarantees the absence of GMOs, as well as pesticides and synthetic substances.



NATRUE certification means no synthetic fragrances or colors, no petroleum-derived ingredients or GMOs, and hasn't been tested on animals.



BDIH certification ensures the product is free from synthetic dyes and fragrances, silicone, paraffin and other petroleum products.



Ecocert certification ensures no GMOs, silicone, PEG (polyethylene glycol), preservatives such as phenoxyethanol, parabens, synthetic perfumes, synthetic dyes, synthetic solvent such as propylene glycol.

Unfortunately, unless a cosmetic has been certified by these or another reputable agency, such as [USDA Organic](#), a "natural" or "made with organic ingredients" label may not mean much. This is because the cosmetics industry has few regulations for the chemicals contained within beauty products.

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Website Resources

Explore some of the resources we've used to research issues of pollution, chemicals and other environmental impacts. Then feel free to empower others to take action and help the environment by sharing what you learn.

- Environmental Working Group (ewg.org)
The Environmental Working Group's mission is to empower people to live healthier lives in a healthier environment. With breakthrough research and education, we drive consumer choice and civic action.
- Care2 - Make a Difference (care2.com)
Care2 is a community of 29 million people standing together for good.
- Healthy Child Healthy World (healthychild.org)
Healthy Child Healthy World, powered by Environmental Working Group, empowers parents to take action and protect children from harmful chemicals.
- Safer Chemicals Healthy Families (saferchemicals.org)
The Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families coalition represents more than 11 million individuals and includes parents, health professionals, advocates for people with learning and developmental disabilities, reproductive health advocates, environmentalists and businesses from across the U.S.
- Environmental Protection Agency (epa.gov)
Our mission is to protect human health and the environment.
- Workgroup for Safe Markets (safemarkets.org)
The Workgroup for Safe Markets is a US-based collaborative of groups united by a common concern about hazardous chemicals in our homes, our bodies and our environment; and a common vision of a cleaner, healthier economy.

Educational Websites for Kids

- National Geographic Kids (kids.nationalgeographic.com)
National Geographic Kids is full of fun learning activities, games, videos and more. Learn all about animals, plants and the world around you.
- EPA Kids (epa.gov/students)
EPA Kids is a multi-disciplinary approach to learning about environmental issues that enhances knowledge, builds critical thinking skills and helps students make informed and responsible decisions.
- Time For Kids (timeforkids.com)
A powerful teaching tool, TIME For Kids builds reading and writing skills and is easily integrated across curricula, including social studies, science and math.

Last, but not least: Norwexmovement.com