

Clean up your act with low-VOC cleaning products

When you clean house do you dirty the air? Cleaning the toilet, using dish and laundry detergent, mopping the floors and scrubbing the countertops are necessary chores, but choosing the wrong products can unnecessarily pollute the air.

Many cleaning products release volatile organic compounds (VOCs), a major component in the formation of ozone or smog. In fact, with the exception of getting vehicles off the road, using low- or no-VOC cleaning products can reduce more emissions than any other environmentally-sound act.

There are a couple of key characteristics and ingredients to look for in a low-VOC cleaning product. Nontoxic, biodegradable, sodium citrate, bicarbonate, carbonate or silicate, and vegetable-based surfactants and solvents (pine and citrus oils contain VOCs, but at lower amounts than many products) are all descriptions used in safer cleaning products.

Try these products, which tend to be lower in (or free from) toxicity and available at your local grocer or hardware store:

- Bon Ami
- 20 Mule Team Borax
- Dr. Bonner Castile Soap
- Ajax Lemon Fresh Liquid
- Mr. Clean
- Spic & Span
- Spic & Span Spray Bath Cleaner
- Murphy's Oil Soap
- Bathroom Duck
- Comet Liquid Bathroom Cleaner
- Orange or lemon oil
- Lemon Pledge Trigger Spray
- Plunger or drain snake

Certain products containing the highest concentrations of VOCs include toilet bowl cleaners, oven cleaners, furniture polish, and automatic dishwasher and laundry detergents. While many of these products are required for home cleaning and maintenance, there are many components of high-VOC products that you can avoid when shopping for cleaners. Read the labels and watch for these clues:

- **VOC-based solvents:** no more than 10 percent benzene, toluene, xylene, trichloroethane
- **Petroleum-based solvents:** avoid petroleum distillates and surfactants, such as nonylphenol, ethoxylate, phenolic compounds, glycol ethers and isopropyl alcohol
- **Chlorine bleach or sodium hypochlorite:** try sodium percarbonate instead
- **Phosphates:** no more than 0.5 percent
- **EDTA and NTA:** avoid these acids used to soften water and increase cleaning power
- **"Danger" or "Poison"** = highly toxic
- **"Warning"** = moderately toxic

- **“Caution”** = less toxic (this may be the least offensive product available; even some “natural” products may contain some caustic ingredients, such as pine oil, and so are labeled with “caution”)

There are several products on the market that are toxic or contain ozone-causing chemicals. Many of these products, including Pinesol, Clorox, Lysol, ammonia and antibacterial soaps are highly toxic and unnecessary. Alternative, more environmentally-friendly products, like baking soda, vinegar, borax and Comet cleaner are equally efficient in cleaning the home. Also, purchase dye- and fragrance-free cleaners, which are typically lower in harmful agents than scented products.

Find out how you can make Clean Air Count by visiting www.cleanaircounts.org. Take a lead in making the air in your home and community cleaner, our quality of life better and our climate more inviting.

Clean Air Counts is a six-county Chicago regional initiative of the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – Region V, City of Chicago and Illinois EPA. It seeks significant reductions in smog-forming pollutants and energy consumption.

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