

Detox Your Digs and Protect Your Posse: How to Make your House a Safe and Healthy Home!

If this year's unusual winter weather is any sign of what lies ahead, there's a good chance we'll be starting our spring cleaning earlier. But before you crack the windows, crank the tunes, and corral the cleaning supplies, resolve to make some small but significant changes in 2012 for a cleaner and greener household.

Revelations and Resolutions

Hopefully most of us would never describe our homes as "hazardous," but many of the products we use every day are actually toxic. Are you curious about the contents of your cabinets? I was, so I began to explore. Let's see... kitchen – antibacterial wipes, oven cleaner; bathroom – tile, toilet, and drain cleaners; basement - lighter fluid, batteries; utility room - bug spray, bleach, flea medicine; garage - paint, propane, fertilizer... YIKES!! Okay, okay, I get it! By reading the labels, I learned that each of these products is potentially hazardous. A quick walk-through of your home can prove to be enlightening yet frightening. Believe it or not the average U.S. household accumulates as much as 100 pounds of hazardous waste over time. So without even realizing it, our ordinary home can be extraordinarily toxic.

Label Lingo

What makes a household product a hazardous waste? In short, it contains ingredients that are potentially harmful to human health and the environment. Reading the labels on products is the first step to gaining a deeper understanding of their hazards. Labels will tell us:

- The product ingredients
- The potential hazard of the product - TOXIC, IGNITABLE, CORROSIVE, and REACTIVE
- Warnings and signal words to identify the product's toxicity level
 1. CAUTION – mild hazard
 2. WARNING – moderate hazard
 3. DANGER or POISON - extremely flammable, corrosive, or highly toxic
- Important directions regarding use, storage, and disposal of the product

Where does it go?

Into the soil then into the river, what do you mean it went straight to my liver? Dumped in the storm drain, washed down the sink, flushed down the toilet? Wait, stop and think! Like it or not, everything *does* go somewhere, even our toxic products. Just as air, soil, and water are the pathways for chemical exposure in the environment, our mouths, noses, skin, and eyes are the pathways for chemical exposure to our bodies. For example, most of us know that mixing ammonia with bleach creates harmful vapors that are dangerous to inhale. Likewise, we know that dumping motor oil into our yard pollutes the soil and possibly ground water. So not all water pollution comes from big factories – it's also caused by little household chores. And each little household adds up to one big hazardous waste problem. The reality is Americans generate 1.6 million tons of harmful household waste per year and thousands of children die each year from chemicals improperly stored and used in the home. Yep, these products are going *somewhere*, but not where they should go. So let's make small changes to increase our understanding of the products in our homes and ways we can use them responsibly for our family's and community's health.

What we can do

1. The first step in dealing with hazardous products is knowing what you already have. Take an inventory of your house, room by room, and read the labels. Consider safe storage strategies such as keeping products away from heat sources, out of reach of children and pets, and only in original containers.
2. When using hazardous products, carefully follow instructions.
3. If you find a hazardous product that you no longer want, either use it up or give it away. Give that half-used gallon of paint to a neighbor or donate it to a group like a high school drama department or Habitat for Humanity.
4. Still no luck? Contact your county's Solid Waste Management District for disposal and recycling options. Collection days and household hazardous waste recycling facilities keep toxics out of landfills and drinking water supplies. Financially, it's a no-brainer!
5. Consider making your own alternative cleaners. Look back at some of your Grandma's products (Borax and Bon Ami) or cleaning recipes made from biodegradable and nontoxic ingredients like baking soda, lemon juice, white distilled vinegar, salt, and liquid soap. They make inexpensive yet effective cleaners!
6. When you absolutely need to buy a hazardous product for a specific job... prevent leftovers! While leftover pizza is great, avoid having leftover hazardous products by buying only what you need. Read labels, look for product certifications, and consider buying less toxic alternatives.

With the help of this list, the Geauga Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) encourages you to leap into this Leap Year with a commitment to reduce the hazardous waste in your home, making it safer, healthier, and ultimately happier. If you need more information, be sure to contact your township or village, the Geauga Trumbull Solid Waste Management District or the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency. Here's to a cleaner, safer, and better tomorrow!