

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE:

42. FIVE HOUSEHOLD TOXINS YOU SHOULD BANISH FROM YOUR HOME¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

Cleaning house doesn't mean nasty chemicals have to pollute your home. Your next home cleaning campaign or daunting do-it-yourself projects can be done without poisoning the air or tainting your local water supply. Most of our safer alternatives will even save you money, too. Here are five chemical culprits to kick out of your house—and the nontoxic options that should move in instead.

- (1) **Coal-tar driveway sealant:** If you plan to seal your blacktop driveway this spring, avoid coal-tar based sealants. They contain polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, or PAHs, which studies suggest can be carcinogenic, toxic, and mutagenic. When rainwater and other precipitation hit your driveway, the toxic chemicals run off into your yard and into your local drinking water supply. In fact, this situation has been compared to dumping quarts of motor oil right down a storm drain.

Better alternative: Gravel and other porous materials are best for driveways, because they allow rainwater to sink into the ground, where it's filtered and won't inundate water treatment plants. But if you do seal blacktop, pick asphalt sealant and stay away from any product that has coal tar in its name (or products simply called "driveway sealant"). Lowe's and Home Depot have already banned the bad stuff, but smaller hardware stores may still carry it.

- (2) **Synthetic pesticides:** Chemical weed and bug killers both fit under this category and should be avoided both inside and outside of your house. (And don't fall for the ones that pretend to be "natural.") Researchers link herbicides to various forms of cancer, including non-Hodgkin's lymphoma; insecticides have been connected to brain damage in kids. "This is a good time of the year to resolve not to use pesticides on lawns and gardens," says Phil Landrigan, MD, an internationally recognized leader in public health, director of Mount Sinai's Children's Environmental Health Center, and Rodale.com advisor. "A few dandelions or buttercups or other little flowers in the middle of the lawn are not unsightly."

Better alternative: Combating an indoor bug problem is as simple as cleaning up crumbs, sealing food in containers, and using wood shims and a caulking gun to fill pest entry points. If you're spending big bucks on chemicals for a turflike lawn, reconsider. Pesticides and chemical fertilizers kill the health of the soil and create a lawn that allows for little rainwater absorption, which contributes to flooding. Try replacing some sod with plants native to your area; they don't require as much water and maintenance.

If you're dead-set on the idea of a perfect grassy lawn, get out there and weed by hand or with organic methods. The extra exercise will help you burn off your winter love handles. Check OrganicGardening.com for advice on chemical-free lawn care, and see our story on [chemical-free fixes²](#) for common lawn problems.

¹ Rodale Daily News, August 30th, 2010

² Seven Chemical-Free Fixes for Common Lawn Problems, Emily Main, Rodale News, July 28, 2010

- (3) **Antibacterial soap:** The antimicrobial chemical triclosan in antibacterial soaps is believed to disrupt thyroid function and hormone levels in people; when it mixes into wastewater, it can cause sex changes in aquatic life. And health experts believe that overuse of this and other antibacterial chemicals is promoting the growth of bacteria that are resistant to antibacterial treatment.

Better alternative: Good old-fashioned soap and warm water will kill just as many germs, studies have shown. If you must use a hand sanitizer, pick one that's alcohol-based and doesn't list triclosan or other chemicals on its label.

- (4) **Synthetic fragrances:** Fragrance may be the most common type of chemical in your house. Used in laundry detergents, fabric softeners, dryer sheets, cleaning supplies and disinfectants, air fresheners, deodorizers, shampoos, hair sprays, gels, lotions, sunscreens, soaps, perfumes, powders, and scented candles, fragrances are a class of chemicals that may take you extra time and effort to avoid. But it's worth it. The term "fragrance" or "parfum" on personal care product labels can be a cover for hundreds of harmful chemicals known to be carcinogens, endocrine disrupters, and reproductive toxicants, even at low levels.

Better alternative: Go the unscented route whenever possible, especially with soaps and detergents. Avoid any kind of air freshener or deodorizer, including sprays, gels, solid disks, and oils, suggests Anne Steinemann, PhD, University of Washington researcher who focuses on water quality and fragrances in consumer products. She's also a Rodale.com advisor. "These products do not clean or disinfect the air, but they do add hazardous chemicals to the air we breath," she says. "Instead of chemical air fresheners, freshen the air with better ventilation and by setting out some baking soda," she suggests. You also can place a bowl of white vinegar in a room to dispel a funky smell.

- (5) **Harsh cleaning products:** Isn't it ironic that we actually contaminate our air when we use harsh chemicals—some of which are carcinogens—to "clean" our homes? Ammonia can trigger asthmatic attacks, and harsh oven cleaners and drain openers can cause terrible damage to children who come into contact with them. "Every year we have these dreadful third-degree burns of the throat and esophagus because kids got into cleaners under the sink," Landrigan says.

Better alternative: Take any cleaner whose ingredient list reads like a chemistry textbook to a hazardous waste disposal center in your municipality and replace the cleaners with ecofriendly ones that have simple, natural ingredients. Better yet, save tons of money and pull out Grandma's homemade cleaning concoctions, including:

- A general cleaning solution of one part white vinegar and nine parts water will kill 90 percent of bacteria and many spores, explains germ expert Donna Duberg, assistant professor of clinical laboratory science at Saint Louis University. Spray it on and let it dry to a nice shine on its own. The best surprise about distilled white vinegar? "Store brands work just as well as brand names," says Duberg. "You can buy a gallon for \$1.89 and make more than 10 gallons of cleaning solution. The only other thing you need is a spray bottle." When you're finished using a vinegar cleaning solution, dump it down your garbage disposal or toilet for bonus odor control.
- For a window glass cleaner, mix one part white vinegar with one part water and spray. Duberg says you even can use newspapers instead of paper towels to wipe the glass clean and save money.

- When cleaning in the kitchen after prepping meat, use hot, soapy water first (we like simple, unscented castile soaps) and then follow with the vinegar-water solution. For more great cleaning tips, check out green-living guru Annie Bond's book, *Home Enlightenment: Create a Nurturing, Healthy, and Toxin-Free Home*.³

³ Bond, A.B. 2008. *Home Enlightenment: Create a Nurturing, Healthy, and Toxin-Free Home*. Rodale Books, Emmanus, PA.