



Household Hazardous Waste

Be Cautious at Home

Some of the products found in American homes have chemical ingredients that are potentially harmful. Look under the kitchen sink, in the bathroom and in the garage for examples. There you'll find oven cleaners, paint remover, bug killers, solvents, drain cleaners and more. These products are potentially harmful to people and to the environment and should be used with care.

Public concern about the use and disposal of hazardous chemicals has grown dramatically in recent years. In 1976, Congress passed the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), which set up regulatory procedures governing generation, storage, transport, treatment and disposal of hazardous materials. There is, however, no regulation of household hazardous wastes, which must be taken care of by individuals.

Household Cleaners

Many of the products used at home, such as soaps and detergents, are meant to be washed down the drain. These products are biodegradable, and, if the wastewater from your home is properly treated, they pose no problem to the environment.

But other products commonly found on kitchen shelves are toxic to people and the environment. Oven cleaners, floor wax, furniture polish, drain cleaners and spot removers are examples. Check the labels of products such as these for the following toxic components: lye, phenols, petroleum distillates, trichlorobenzene. Products containing these chemicals pose a potential threat to health, if improperly used, and also present real environmental hazards when it comes to disposal.

For example, some people think the periodic use of a toxic drain cleaner will prevent clogging when simply pouring a kettle of boiling water down the drain can be just as effective. If a drain is plugged, try using a plunger and put some muscle into it before resorting to strong chemicals! Another remedy for a clogged drain is to pour 1/2 cup of baking soda into the drain first, then slowly pour in 1/2 cup of white vinegar; let it stand for 15 minutes, then flush it with boiling water.

It's often possible to use an alternative, less toxic method to clean or to polish. Ovens, for example, can be cleaned by applying table salt to spills, then scrubbing with a solution of baking soda and water. A combination of lemon oil and linseed oil makes a good furniture polish.

When you feel it's absolutely necessary to use a product containing toxic chemicals, some cautions should be observed. As with pesticides, read the label and use the product only as directed. Some products become even more dangerous when mixed with others; for example, chlorine bleach mixed with ammonia can produce deadly chloramine gas. Protective clothing and rubber gloves may be necessary; good ventilation is a must.

What You Can Do

Here are some general rules for handling and disposing of household chemicals:

- Read the label. Know what you are buying and what the potential hazards are.
- Store products in their original containers so you can refer to the labels when you use the products.
- Use alternative, less harmful products whenever possible (for example, boric acid is very effective in controlling roaches).
- Use the least toxic product you can find, and never buy more than you need.
- Dispose of your unwanted household chemicals in sanitary landfills. Pour liquids such as cleaning fluids into a plastic container that is filled with kitty litter or stuffed with newspaper. Allow it to dry outdoors before taking it to the landfill.
- Take used motor oil and antifreeze to a gas station with an oil recycling program.
- Insist on effective sewage treatment for your community.



A Word About Detergents

One of the most-used home cleaning products is detergent. Many detergent products formulated for automatic washing machines and dishwashers contain phosphorous, which causes water quality problems in lakes and rivers. The detergent industry has responded to this problem by developing products that contain little or no phosphate. For example, all liquid detergents are phosphorous-free, as are some powders. Again, the label will clearly tell you the phosphorous content. The range is from about 13%, in some automatic dishwashing detergents, to none. When you have a choice, buy the low phosphorous product.

Home Maintenance Products

Among the most toxic household products are those used for home repair and maintenance. Paints, preservatives, strippers, brush cleaners and solvents contain a wide range of chemicals, some of which are suspected carcinogens (cancer-causing). These products should never be put into sewer or septic systems –in other words, not down the drain. To reduce these problems, buy only what you need.

Disposing of Household Toxics

The kinds of household toxics described here should not be poured down the drain. Your drain leads either to a home septic system or a municipal treatment plant, neither of which is designed to completely remove toxic chemicals from wastewater. At least some of the toxics pass through the treatment process and end up in a bayou, river or groundwater.

The products described in this publication also should never be poured on the ground or into gutters where they will eventually enter storm sewers, which generally lead directly to a nearby waterway.

In many areas, the only available disposal method is the local landfill. Although probably a little better than flushing a toxic chemical down the drain, landfills are not a good long-term solution to our waste disposal problems. New energy needs to go into finding better solutions.

Where household hazardous wastes must be sent to a landfill, steps can be taken to reduce the environmental risk. First, wrap the product in its original container in newspaper, and then wrap it in an old plastic bag. Liquids can be poured into a container filled with absorbent kitty litter, then wrapped in plastic.

Some states deal with the problem of hazardous household wastes by sponsoring hazardous waste collection days. On collection day, small quantities of your unwanted household chemicals and pesticides are collected and disposed of in an approved facility. The actual collection and disposal of the waste should be performed by technicians who know which chemicals should not be mixed together. Amnesty days are designed to educate the general public about the potential hazards of improper use and disposal of consumer products that contain toxic chemicals. Check with your state, parish or city government to find out about hazardous household wastes collection days in your area.

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