

# Avoid chemicals in your daily life by going back to the basics

April 6 2012, By Amanda Harper

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(Medical Xpress) -- Research increasingly points to the products common in our daily lives—including cosmetics and household cleaners—as sources of potentially dangerous chemical exposures.

Susan Pinney, PhD, an epidemiologist and associate professor with the University of Cincinnati (UC) College of Medicine's environmental health department, says no one should assume they are safe: "People need to be their own health advocates; consumer products are, in fact, products marketed because they are designed to fill a perceived need of the general population. Regulations are not always as strict as you may assume."

A recent Silent Spring Institute study published in the scientific journal [\*Environmental Health Perspectives\*](#) found an "alarming number of chemicals of concern" in a broad range of household and personal care products. All 42 of the conventional product types and even the majority of "green" products they tested contained their target chemicals, including antibacterials (triclosan and triclocarban) and fragranced products. Researchers point out that many of these concerning chemicals aren't identifiable on product labels.

"People can do a lot to reduce their exposure to chemicals we suspect contribute to health problems, such as cancer, by exercising a level of caution in the decisions they make on a daily basis—for example, choosing basic soap and water to wash your hands versus antibacterial soaps or avoiding pesticides on your lawn," adds Pinney.

Here are some steps Pinney and environmental health experts at the Silent Spring Institute recommend to reduce unnecessary chemical exposures:

## **Read product labels and understand why the ingredients are used.**

Specifically, avoid products that contain phthalates and fragrance. Phthalates are endocrine-disrupting compounds that have been shown to mimic and alter the function of naturally occurring hormones in the body. Phthalates are used to make things more flexible and exist in a surprising array of products, including toys, food packaging, hoses, raincoats, shower curtains, vinyl flooring, wall coverings, lubricants, adhesives, detergents, nail polish, hair spray and shampoo.

## **Use fewer products—in your home and on your body.**

Products that are applied directly to the body can penetrate the skin, sometimes entering the bloodstream. Fragrances are of particular concern because of their unknown composition. Although companies are required to list all [chemical](#) ingredients in a product, a special loophole allows manufacturers to avoid disclosing the complex mixture of chemicals classified as "fragrance"—which typically includes phthalates and musks—that give the product a particular scent. Learn more about how to buy safely in the Environmental Working Group's [report](#) on fragrance.

## **Use glass, ceramic or stainless steel cookware to avoid PFCs.**

Nonstick pans use perfluorochemicals, or PFCs, that have been shown to be endocrine disruptors in both animals and humans and persistent once

they enter the human body. They also exist in other products designed to repel rain or stains, such as water-proof clothing and stain-resistant carpet. Glass, ceramic and stainless steel cookware are safer choices.

## **Go back to the basics of soap and water for cleaning.**

Fragrance-free, basic soap teamed with water is still the best way to keep your hands and body clean. Although they have gained tremendous popularity, antibacterial soaps that contain antimicrobials such as triclosan are actually classified as pesticides. "Many home cleansers contain harsh chemicals that can pose harm to humans if ingested. The basics do the job just as well, if not better, without the toxicity," says Pinney. These 'basics' include white vinegar, baking soda, club soda, cornstarch and water, among other things. The [Daily Green](#) offers a full guide for making your own nontoxic cleansers.

## **Avoid charring when grilling foods.**

Char from grilling with charcoal—contains polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are known to cause mammary tumors in animals and chronic exposure has been linked to cancer, reproductive development problems and organ damage.

## **Be a responsible electronics user.**

Electronic devices like music players, personal computers and televisions include a mixture of many chemicals that cause known adverse health effects alone: lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs), says Aimin Chen, PhD, an assistant professor with UC's environmental health department. Chen is leading the first international population-based study aimed at determining how exposure to this complex e-waste toxicant mixture impacts human health.

Seek out a recycling center for worn out electronic devices instead of tossing them in the landfill where those metals may leach into the soil or water. The same goes for recycling batteries and compact fluorescent light bulbs.

## **Buy local, organically grown foods.**

Produce is often grown thousands of miles away from the people who end up consuming it. This makes it hard to verify where and in what conditions your food was grown, but it also increases the likelihood that products have been added to the food or food containers to preserve the food, says Mary Beth Genter, PhD, a toxicologist and professor with UC's environmental health department: "As an example, it is common for fruit containers or even fruit itself to be sprayed with fungicides to prevent mold."

Studies are inconclusive about whether organic produce is more nutritious, Genter says, but choosing to purchase USDA organic produce can help reduce pesticide exposure through the foods you eat. Keep a [list](#) of the "Dirty Dozen" and the "Clean 15" handy when you shop for groceries. Thoroughly washing and peeling vegetables prior to cooking can reduce ingestion of pesticide residues.

More information on environmental exposures and steps to prevent human health concerns is available through the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's](#) green living guide.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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