

Buyer beware: Antimicrobial products can do more harm than good

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Are you buying antimicrobial or antibacterial soaps? According to over 200 scientists and medical professionals, you may want to save your money. A consensus statement [published today](#) in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* concludes that common antimicrobial products do not provide health benefits and cause health and environmental harm. The statement also calls for greater caution in using antimicrobial chemicals in everyday products.

"People think antimicrobial hand soaps offer better protection against illness. But generally, antimicrobial soaps perform no better than plain [soap](#) and water," said Barbara Sattler, RN, DrPH, FAAN, [environmental health](#) professor at the University of San Francisco. Last fall, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) determined that 19 different antimicrobial chemicals, including infamous triclosan and triclocarban, were not effective and should not be marketed for use in over-the-counter consumer wash products. Now, [200 scientists say](#) the FDA's decision does not go far enough to protect consumers and the environment.

In consumer soaps and washes, brands are using different additives. "I was happy that the FDA finally acted to remove these chemicals from soaps. But I was dismayed to discover at my local drugstore that most products now contain substitutes that may be worse," said [Arlene Blum, PhD](#), Executive Director of Green Science Policy Institute.

Antimicrobials are also commonplace in products where you wouldn't expect them, including paints, exercise mats, flooring, apparel, food

storage containers, home textiles, electronics, kitchenware, school supplies, and countertops.

"Customers may think added antimicrobials are a way to reduce infections, but in most products there is no evidence that they do," said Ted Schettler, MD, MPH, Science Director of the Science and Environmental Health Network. In 2016, Dr. Schettler authored a report on antimicrobials in [hospital furnishings](#) for the nonprofit Health Care Without Harm.

"Added antimicrobials are marketed as beneficial in building products from countertops to doorknobs and light switches" said Bill Walsh, President of Healthy Building Network, which recently produced a white paper on [antimicrobial building products](#) . "Antimicrobial preservatives are useful in certain products like paints, but we found claims about [health benefits](#) to be largely invalid." Nevertheless, sales of "antimicrobial" performance products are projected to grow.

Scientists and [health](#) professionals agree that non-medical uses of antimicrobials should be reduced. "Environmental and human exposures to triclosan and triclocarban are widespread, affecting pregnant women, developing fetuses, and breast-feeding babies," said Rolf Halden, PhD, PE professor of engineering at Arizona State University. "We must develop better alternatives and prevent unneeded exposures to antimicrobial chemicals."

More information: *Environmental Health Perspectives* (2017). [DOI: 10.1289/EHP1788](https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP1788)

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