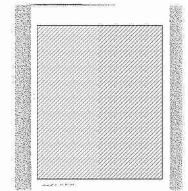


What's in that cleaner?

How to pick less-toxic products for your home—and the environment



If you're on the hunt for greener cleaners with safer ingredients, you might want to do some research before you head to the store—and get a degree in chemistry. We're not kidding!

Even though voluntary industry guidelines that went into effect in January suggest that manufacturers tell you what's in their products, we were frustrated to find that many major makers of household cleaners are listing products' ingredients online, not on labels, which would be more helpful. And ingredient disclosure can be vague. For example, the ingredient list might include the words preservative, fragrance, or dye. But each one of those things can be made up of many different chemicals. And some of those chemicals are known to be problematic, including phthalates, which fragrances might contain. (See box on page 30 for more info.)

One company, SC Johnson, the maker of Windex and Fantastik, said it plans to list everything

on its labels by 2012. That's good news, but why keep us waiting to learn about the chemicals in products we use every day? We at ShopSmart think the industry needs to do more. So we support the Household Product Labeling Act of 2009, which would require that labels have more complete information about the specific ingredients found in dyes, fragrances, and preservatives.

That said, the voluntary guidelines are a step in the right direction and can be helpful. If you're trying to avoid using ammonia or bleach, for example, you now have a better chance of identifying products that contain them.

The problem is that disclosure is one thing, but understanding all the chemical mumbo-jumbo is quite another. Some labels, for example, list ammonia only by its chemical name, ammonium hydroxide. And unless you're a chemist, it's nearly impossible to make heads or tails out of long, chemical names, let alone figure out

which ones might be harmful to your health or the environment. We talked to scientists who said that even they don't always know what all the ingredients do. But there are shopping strategies that can help you make smarter choices.

Here's a five-step plan for getting smart about cleaners.

1. Look for label warnings. The more serious the safety warning, the more likely the product poses risks to your health or to the environment. Those labeled "Poison" or "Danger" are more toxic than ones marked "Warning" or "Caution." Also, look for labels that say what the product *doesn't* have, such as "No parabens or synthetic preservatives." But don't rely on a word like "natural," which doesn't always mean the product is nontoxic or nonirritating. For starters, there is no nationally accepted standard definition of the word natural for cleaning products. And not all natural products are problem free. When we



checked the ingredients in Seventh Generation's Emerald Cypress & Fir Tub & Tile Cleaner online, for example, we spotted sodium hydroxide, a known corrosive that can irritate and even burn the eyes.

2. Watch for seals that indicate you're buying a greener cleaner. We think the most meaningful ones are those that have been verified by an independent third party. Turn the page for a sampling of helpful—and not-so-helpful—labels.

3. Scan ingredient lists. Most cleaners' labels do not list ingredients, so you'll have to go online. A lot of info is reasonably easy to access on company sites. (You can also call the toll-free number on the product.) Or go to www.cleaning101.com/ingredientcentral; this new service from the Soap and Detergent Association lets you access all member companies' info from one handy list. But some company sites aren't as helpful as others. For example, at press time Proctor & Gamble's site did not post ingredient lists for

Safety alert!

When working with harsh products that contain bleach, ammonia, or other irritating chemicals always wear gloves and work in a ventilated area. And don't forget the goggles—they might look silly, but chemicals such as ammonia can cause blindness if they get in your eyes. To reduce the odds that a splash will hit you in the face, always add water to a bucket or spray bottle first, then carefully add detergent, ammonia, bleach, or other products. And NEVER mix bleach with products like toilet-bowl cleaners or ammonia; when combined they can produce deadly fumes.

a number of its products. Another site, www.whatsinsidescjohnson.com, was easy to navigate and included explanations of ingredients, but its product list was also incomplete. The new Clorox site, www.cloroxcsr.com, is user-friendly, though as of press time we couldn't access it from the company's site. It has some helpful info on more than 230 Clorox products, including the Green Works line. But as on other sites, we found that the lists were not always comprehensive.

4. Use our "Clip-and-Save Label Decoder." On the facing page are a sampling of cleaner ingredients that you might want to limit or avoid, especially antibacterials, which aren't necessary in most households. Another good source for info is GoodGuide.com.

HELPFUL



Certified Biodegradable

This logo means a product was reviewed by the reputable [Scientific Certification Systems](http://www.scscertified.com) and found to be biodegradable, nontoxic to water and plants, and phosphate free. But not all products listed are easy to find, as you'll see at www.scscertified.com.



Green Seal

Products with this check logo, including Ace Hardware Peroxide Cleaner and Oxy-Clean Powdered Bleach, are certified to a set of standards by Green Seal, a nonprofit, independent group of experts. Go to www.greenseal.org for more info.



Design for the Environment

This label means the ingredients were evaluated by the Environmental Protection Agency for health and environmental impact, not that they are harmless; they might be the lesser of evils. Among the products that bear this stamp are some from Amway's Legacy of Clean line and Clorox Green Works. Get a complete list at www.epa.gov/dfe.



Leaping Bunny

Found on many Seventh Generation and Method products, among others, this logo is certified by a coalition of animal-protection groups and indicates that the company and its suppliers do not conduct or commission tests on animals. But some ingredients might have been tested on animals before the company joined the coalition.

IFFY



Greenlist

You'll find this manufacturer's logo on SC Johnson products, including Windex, which contains not-so-green ammonia. SC Johnson decides whether its products are green; there is no third-party evaluation.



Sierra Club

Clorox paid the group \$470,000 based on sales of Green Works products in 2008. But the label isn't a meaningful tool for consumers.