

## Let's Clear the Air...Indoors

These days, the fragrance of home is likely sweetly scented and bacteria-free, thanks to the freshener/disinfectant of your choice. But did you know that these delicious fragrances may be serving as Band-Aids over a host of toxic indoor pollutants, *often adding to the toxic load?*

The truth is that, while we spend roughly 85% of our time indoors, the EPA estimates that our indoor air may be two to five times more toxic than outside air, even in industrial areas. Why? Roughly 80,000 chemicals and compounds are commonly used in our household products we use every day – ranging from shower caulk to oven cleaner to shampoo – and each year roughly 1800 more are added to the list. Of these, only a very small number are tested for toxicity on humans, animals or the environment.

If I were to address all the dire impact of common household products on both people and the planet, this column would become a book...so here's a very short list focusing only on human health.

- **All-purpose cleaners:** *Glycol ether*, *Stoddard solvent*, and *naptha* act as neurotoxins and central nervous system depressants, and are toxic to the kidneys and liver. *Diglycol laurate* can also be a liver and kidney poison.
- **Disinfectants:** *Aptha* is a neurotoxin and central nervous system depressant. *Butyl cellosolve* and *sodium nitrite* are highly toxic. *Sodium sulfites* can be fatal to asthmatics.
- **Glass Cleaners:** *Organic solvents* and *petroleum-based waxes* are neurotoxins and central nervous system depressants, which can cause confusion, headaches, lack of concentration, and symptoms of mental illness. *Phosphoric acid* and *ammonia* are highly corrosive.

Two types of toxins are receiving an increasing amount of media coverage, as they both show up in a staggering number of products and have very serious health effects.

- **Phthalates** are a family of chemicals including di-2-ethyl hexyl phthalate (DEHP), diisodecyl phthalate (DIDP), and diisononyl phthalate (DINP). They are used as softeners and solvents in products including cosmetics, perfumes, PVC toys for children and adults, vinyl shower curtains, car seats, wallpaper, and much more. They can damage the liver, kidneys, lungs and reproductive system, particularly the developing testes of young boys.
- **Volatile Organic Compounds (a.k.a. VOCs)** are used in home improvement products such as building materials, paint strippers, paints and lacquers; furnishings, cleaning supplies and pesticides; office equipment such as copier and printer toner; and craft products such as permanent markers, glues, and adhesives.

Among the health effects listed by the EPA for VOCs are: eye, nose, and throat irritation; headaches, loss of coordination, nausea; damage to liver, kidney, and central nervous system. Some organics may also cause cancer in humans.

To learn about the toxins in your home, see the U.S. Health and Human Services Household Products Database at <http://hpd.nlm.nih.gov/>. For a good introduction to protecting your indoor air quality, see <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/> and <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/voc.html>

Fortunately, thanks to public pressure, less toxic alternatives are becoming available in mainstream stores. To avoid as many toxins as possible, look for products with statements like these on their packaging:

- Phthalate Free
- Fragrance Free
- Biodegradable
- Chlorine Free
- No VOCs
- Non Petroleum Based
- Vegetable Oil Based
- Phosphate Free

For more information on green building products, contact Catonsville's own Alter Ego at <http://www.alter-e.com>. For simple steps you can take to create a healthy, toxin-free home, contact me at [phila.baltimore@greenirene.com](mailto:phila.baltimore@greenirene.com) or visit [www.greenirene.com/1206](http://www.greenirene.com/1206).

