ANTIMICROBIALS

Practical information for homes, schools and communities.
A California Safe Schools education project.

Choose What You Need

Reduce unnecessary chemical exposure. Start with the products you use most.

THE EVERYDAY CHOICE

For most routine home cleaning, soap or detergent and water remove dirt and most germs. Save disinfectants for when someone is sick, has a weakened immune system, or public-health guidance calls for disinfection.

PRODUCTS YOU MAY BE USING

PRODUCT	WHAT TO KNOW	SAFER CHOICE
Disinfecting sprays, wipes and bleach	Sanitizers and disinfectants are antimicrobial pesticides. They can release chemicals into indoor air.	Clean routinely with soap or detergent and water. Disinfect only when someone is sick, has a weakened immune system, or guidance calls for it.
Antibacterial hand and body soap	In 2016 the FDA ruled that 19 ingredients, including triclosan, can no longer be used in over-the-counter antibacterial soaps and body washes. The rule does not cover hand sanitizers or wipes.	Choose plain soap and water.
Hand sanitizer	Regulated by FDA as a drug. Discarded alcohol-based sanitizer is generally hazardous waste in California (see back).	Use when soap and water are unavailable; choose at least 60% alcohol. Wash visibly dirty hands with soap and water first.
Treated cutting boards, toys, towels, clothing, mattresses	Look for “antimicrobial,” “antibacterial,” “anti-odor,” or “treated to protect the product.” That protects the product, not you. These are materials preservatives regulated by EPA.	Choose untreated, washable options. Treatments don’t replace washing, drying, or safe food handling.

CLEANING, SANITIZING, OR DISINFECTING?

CLEANING	SANITIZING	DISINFECTING
Removes dirt and most germs by washing and wiping.	Reduces bacteria on surfaces.	Kills or inactivates the germs named on the label when used as directed.

PROTECT YOUR INDOOR AIR

Cleaners, disinfectants, and air fresheners can release chemicals into indoor air. Fewer products and fragrances mean less exposure.

7 – Day Challenge	Observe	Change Habits and Products
Remove all cleaning products, pesticides, air fresheners, colognes, perfumes from living areas for 7 days.	See if you notice changes in the air and ease of breathing.	To protect health, change to products that are nontoxic, cost less, and don’t have adverse effects.

TURN OVER → label reading, never mixing products, hand sanitizer disposal, and help

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Read the Label. Use Less.

Practical safety steps for families, students, schools, and community members.

WHAT MATTERS IS WHAT THE LABEL CLAIMS

Not only how you use a product at home. Check your exact bottle, and follow its directions.

BLEACH: ONE CHEMICAL, DIFFERENT LABELS

LABEL HAS GERM-KILLING DIRECTIONS	LABEL HAS NO GERM-KILLING CLAIMS
Example: Disinfecting Bleach carries an EPA Reg. No. and is an EPA-registered pesticide, even if you use it only to clean or whiten. Follow its dilution, contact-time, and ventilation directions.	Example: Some scented bleach products are sold only to whiten, deodorize, or clean. Without pest-killing claims they may not be pesticides or need EPA registration.

BEFORE YOU USE A PRODUCT

1. **Find the basics.** Product name, active ingredients, signal word, "Keep Out of Reach of Children," net contents and, for surface disinfectants, an EPA Reg. No. Hand sanitizers have a Drug Facts label instead.
2. **Read all directions.** Check surfaces, dilution, amount, ventilation, gloves/eye protection, and first aid. Clean first; keep disinfected surfaces wet for the full contact time. Follow any food-contact rinsing directions.
3. **Understand the signal word.** It shows short-term hazard only: DANGER is the highest (corrosive or highly toxic), WARNING is moderate, CAUTION is lower but not "harmless." Follow the directions whatever it says.

NEVER MIX CLEANING PRODUCTS

DO NOT MIX BLEACH WITH OTHER CLEANERS OR DISINFECTANTS

Mixing bleach with other cleaners, especially ammonia or acidic products such as many toilet-bowl cleaners, can release dangerous vapors. Store products in original labeled containers, away from children, and never in food or drink containers.

HAND SANITIZER: USE AND DISPOSE SAFELY

Use: At least 60% alcohol when soap and water are unavailable. Follow the Drug Facts directions, supervise children, never swallow it, and keep it out of eyes. Use in a ventilated area, away from heat and flames.

Dispose: In California, discarded or unusable alcohol-based hand sanitizer is generally ignitable hazardous waste (DTSC, March 2025). Don't pour it down drains, put it in the trash, or dump it on the ground. Take leftovers to a household hazardous-waste drop-off; empty containers may go in curbside recycling.

GET HELP OR REPORT A PROBLEM

SUSPECTED POISONING: Call Poison Control **1-800-222-1222**. For a medical emergency, call 911. Keep the product label available.