

More Home Chemical Myths

Lisa Turner

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In the last column I talked about a common household myth that commercial air fresheners are safe and non-polluting (they're not). Let's continue our discussion of common household chemicals that you might want to live without.

Bleach. Bleach, or sodium hypochlorite, is a friend to most of us in the home. We use it for cleaning, de-staining, and disinfecting. In an emergency you can disinfect water for drinking by adding several drops of bleach in to a quart of water. We've come to rely on "that bleach smell" as the badge of safety.

But bleach has a dark side. Bleach consists of chlorine and caustic soda, both products that are considered dangerous because of their potential to interact with other chemicals. Here are a few reasons to cut down on your use of bleach.

- Bleach can be a hazard for children. Children are curious and many will try tasting or eating things that they find in the home. This goes for the common laundry pods too. My advice is to not use laundry pods (use liquid), and keep bleach where children cannot reach it.
- Bleach interacts with other common chemicals kept in the home. These include window cleaners (ammonia), acids (vinegar), dishwashing detergents, and drain cleaners. The gaseous combination of ammonia and bleach together can be fatal. Advice? Keep only a small amount of bleach in a safe place and don't use it routinely. Much safer cleaning products include baking soda, vinegar, and old-fashioned soap and water.
- Bleach is bad for your septic system. Bleach ends up in your septic tank and slows the natural interaction of your tank's chemical breakdown of waste. The less bleach you use, the better.

Drain Cleaners. Remember the Drano commercials? They were funny and appealing, but Drano and the family of lye based cleaners are anything but appealing. Made with a combination of lye, bleach, sodium chloride, and aluminum, they generate near boiling temperatures in a drain. Besides the fumes burning eyes, skin, and lungs, drain cleaners also damage plumbing. Yes, that's correct. Regular use of these corrosive cleaners can damage your plumbing. Advice?

Clean clogs naturally with drain brushes designed for the job, hot water, or use a plumbing “snake” which can break up clogs.

Toilet bowl cleaners. Combining chlorine with hydrochloric acid, the strongest bowl cleaners are highly toxic. If you use them, protect yourself with mask and gloves, and realize that these cleaners are as bad as bleach when it comes to your septic system health. Advice? Switch to Soft Scrub without bleach. One trick I use to get rid of toilet bowl stains is to use a scrub sponge with lemon Soft Scrub or baking soda and some elbow grease; turn off the water to the bowl, flush, then scrub. Yes, it’s work. But once the stains are gone, regular cleaning should keep it that way. Don’t forget to turn the water valve back on.

A note about toilet bowl “automatic cleaners.” If you drop Never Scrub or the blue tabs in your toilet tank, expect to replace plastic parts and seals twice as fast. The cleaners are corrosive. I found this out several years ago sitting in the living room watching a program on rain forests. I felt a drip of liquid on my head which rolled down my face. I turned to my husband and said, “Wow, this feels realistic.” I looked up at the ceiling to see water dripping from the bathroom above. Years of treating the toilet tank caused the toilet floor seal to fail.

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