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A clean house could be a health hazard**Report tracks risky chemicals in products**

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P-I REPORTER

Common household cleaning products used to make laundry smell fresh, floors shine and ovens sparkle could also be triggering asthma attacks and causing harm to growing babies.

A new report by an environmental group zeroed in on five chemicals that may pose health risks and tracked down some of the products in which they're found. They include consumer favorites such as certain formulations of Pine-Sol, Formula 409 All Purpose Cleaner, detergents Cheer and Tide, and Easy-Off oven cleaner.

Manufacturers are not required to label their spray bottles and boxes to say what chemicals are present. Consumers can sometimes find the information online, but it's not always easy.

"We're looking for manufacturers to start listing the ingredients on the products," said Alexandra Gorman, director of science and research for Women's Voices for the Earth, the Montana-based non-profit group that released the report Tuesday.

The group is trying to educate the public about the risks and is sending letters to the manufacturers urging them to make the information more readily available.

Chemicals highlighted as problematic include phthalates, which are found in fragrances; surfactants called monoethanolamine and alkyl phenol ethoxylates; ammonium quaternary compounds used as disinfectants; and glycol ethers, such as 2-butoxyethanol, which are solvents.

Some of the chemicals can induce asthma in people using cleaning products in the workplace, while others have been associated with developmental defects and reproductive problems in humans or research animals.

Federal law requires manufacturers to list ingredients on items that are considered hazardous -- but that leaves out a lot of potentially harmful products.

Those in the chemical industry said the public is being protected when it comes to household items.

"I am very comfortable with the labeling requirements of the Consumer Product Safety Commission," said Neal Langerman, treasurer for the Chemical Health and Safety division of the American Chemical Society, a trade group.

Manufacturers don't list every ingredient for every product primarily to protect trade secrets and because there's not enough room on labels, some in the industry said.

Langerman said that the system isn't perfect. Even when labeling is required, not all manufacturers adequately follow the rules, and consumers don't always use products according to directions. People worried about safety should avoid items labeled "danger," "warning" or "caution," he said.

But there are more subtle health effects that are missed by these designations.

"One of the biggest concerns is that there is a huge number of chemicals used -- thousands and thousands -- in household products and industry," said Janice Camp, a senior lecturer in the University of Washington's Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences.

The current requirements for judging the safety of these chemicals and what they can do to people and the environment "is not very rigorous," Camp said.

"In many cases, they don't have to do very much testing at all."

Even those in the chemical industry agreed that more health and safety research would be useful but said it's expensive and slow.

If consumers are worried about store-bought cleaning products, there are alternatives.

For years, environmental groups have distributed "Green Cleaning Kits" provided by King and Pierce counties. The kits include multilingual instructions for making cleansers out of baking soda, vinegar and other non-toxic ingredients.

While easier on the ecosystem and human health than some commercial items, there are trade-offs, said Kevin Burrell, deputy director of the Environmental Coalition of South Seattle.

"Most of them require more elbow grease," he said.

CLEANING PRODUCT SAFETY

Environmentalists and health care experts are concerned about certain chemicals in common cleaning products because of links to asthma and reproductive problems.

- **Read the report on cleaning chemicals and products of concern:**

womenandenvironment.org

- **Search for your favorite product:**

householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov

- **Make your own non-toxic cleansers:**

goto.seattlepi.com/r873

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