



THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

Evaluating Toxics When Considering a New Home

I'm in the process of moving to a new home, and it's led me to think about the ways we can assess potential toxics in a place that we're considering renting or buying.

Certainly, toxics can seem like just one more thing to worry about during an already-stressful time. And yet, we'll be living with the results, and a toxic place can make us feel sick and miserable, as plenty of people's horror stories demonstrate.

Therefore, to take care of ourselves and our families, it's useful for us to "look before we leap."

It also might seem that the remedy is simple: just ask the current owners if they use any toxics. You certainly can try that. However, even people concerned about toxics might not really know where toxics lurk.

For instance, when I was considering buying a sweet little house many years ago, I asked the sellers about their toxic use, and they passionately swore that they didn't use toxics. But, as I walked into the backyard, I thought I smelled chlorpyrifos, a serious neurotoxic organophosphate that I knew from my previous exposure via neighboring apple orchards.

So, when I was in their garage, I looked at their products — and saw "flea dip" for dogs. Its main ingredient? Yup, chlorpyrifos. The sellers just didn't realize that it was toxic.

Many other toxics can be hiding in a home you're considering, including pesticides, paints, glues, solvents, oil, gas, and more. Plus, house compo-

nents can have toxics, such as items made with pressboard, which usually contains formaldehyde.

So how can you assess a place? Here are some ideas to help you devise your own approach, based on your own priorities.

What you can do

1) Walk through the whole house and yard, focusing on what you see, smell, and feel in each area.

Go slowly and listen to your body. Do you get a headache or unsettled stomach? Also, if others in your household are especially impacted by toxics, invite them to do this too; sensitivities can vary by individual.

If you smell something of concern, look around for its possible source. Is it in the furniture or part of the house? Or was a toxic product perhaps used there?

Also look for newly built or remodeled areas, as these often can contain toxic materials.

2) In the garage and cleaning supply areas, look for any toxic products, such as pesticides, rat poison, moth balls, etc. Read the labels to assess toxicity. First look for the legal words Danger (the worst), Warning (next), and Caution (next). See "Assessing Pesticides" for more about how to read labels, www.healthyworld.org/GRAPHICS/STEP/stepvol5no4.pdf.

3) Ask the owners if they've ever sprayed pesticides or had someone do it — and, if so, what, when, and how often. The product name lets you look up the toxicity later. Knowing how recent and often helps you estimate how long it will remain.

4) Ask the owners about any other concerns you have. For instance, ask them where and how often they use the toxic products you saw, and note if they seem to respect their toxicity. If you think an installation might be toxic, ask if they put it in and where they got it. By being casually curious, you can help them feel safe revealing this information.

5) Notice how you feel after your walkthrough. If you get a headache in an hour or so, your body might be warning you about materials that risk more systemic harm.

6) If there are nearby farms, contact the Sonoma County Agricultural Commissioner's office and ask what pesticides those farms use and if they're certified organic. The office might provide a product list for free, but charge if you need help researching the materials. www.sonomacounty.ca.gov/Agricultural-Commissioner, (707) 565-2371

7) If you're buying a home and testing your well water, consider adding a pesticide panel.

8) If your process highlights any materials of concern, research how toxic each one is, how long it lasts, and how you might address it. Sometimes thoroughly washing and airing out an area can be sufficient. Or perhaps you can remove the offending carpets, seal the shelves, etc. But not everything can be solved easily. Save yourself future trouble by asking questions, researching online, and consulting with experts as needed.

9) Weigh any toxic concerns relative to your needs and how much you like the place. Decide if you want to try to address any issues.

10) If you do move into a place and find toxic products, be sure to discard them safely. Find out more at www.recyclenow.org, (707) 565-3375.

I hope that this information helps you create a safe and happy home!



Beauty Detox Redux

In the *TNS XIV/4* article "Detoxing Your Body Care Routine," I discussed various ways you can avoid toxics in your personal care products, and choose healthier options instead.

Five Seals to Guide Your Way

In addition to that article's tips, you can also get guidance from certification seals on product packaging. Here are some key ones that you might see and seek.

1) Certified Organic. Organic is a legally defined term which assures that food is grown without using toxic pesticides.

However, U.S. organic standards don't explicitly cover personal care products, which can include non-food ingredients. **That's why I recommend that you look for certified organic beauty products;** only these are confirmed to adhere to organic food standards. **Also, if a product is less than 100% organic,** check what else is on the ingredients list. Learn more at www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5068442

2) NSF/ANSI 305. This seal requires that at least 70% of a product be organic, with some limits on the rest of the ingredients. It does allow some processes not accepted in U.S. organic standards. www.qai-inc.com/media/docs/Contains_Organic_Ingredients_FAQ.pdf

3) Natural Products Association. This seal requires products

to contain at least 95% natural ingredients, excluding water. Natural is defined as coming from a renewable natural source, such as plants and minerals, but not petroleum. The remaining 5% must have no suspected health risks or realistic natural alternatives. No animal testing is allowed. <http://bit.ly/XIQAfH>.

4) Ecocert. This international organization's "natural cosmetic" certification requires that at least 95% of ingredients come from natural origins; 50% of plant-based ingredients be organic; and 5% of total ingredients be organic. Its designation "organic cosmetic" bumps the latter figures up to 95% and 10%. (Note: To me, 10% seems low for a product labeled organic, and I'm not fully satisfied by Ecocert's explanation that most cosmetics average 50 to 60% water, which can't be certified.) www.ecocert.com/en/natural-and-organic-cosmetics

5) Leaping Bunny. This logo indicates that no new animal testing has been conducted during a product's development. Created by a coalition of animal rights groups. www.leapingbunny.org

Phasing in Healthier Products

A recent *Real Simple* article also made an excellent point: "Using natural and organic cosmetics doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing affair. Even small steps can lead to happy results."

So, for instance, the author suggests that you might start by swapping to a less-toxic body lotion, because this product covers so much of your skin and stays on all day.

Another idea is to maybe use a natural product just part of the time, such as a natural deodorant in the cooler winter time but a stronger antiperspirant in the hotter summer.

The magazine also mentions that a natural or organic product still might irritate your skin, perhaps because of an essential oil inside. So, if you're sensitive, perhaps test it on a small patch of skin before use.

"4 Ideas for a Greener Beauty Routine," By Jenny Jin, *Real Simple*, www.realsimple.com/beauty-fashion/skincare/green-beauty-routine-00100000125778/index.html

Keep the Birds Singing Their Sacred Songs

Among the prompts for Rachel Carson to write her milestone 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, was a letter from a Massachusetts friend bemoaning the many birds dying from DDT sprayings. In a striking section of Carson's book, she paints a chilling picture of a nameless American town "silenced" by DDT's effects.

Carson's research and inspirational writing did lead to a significant reduction of DDT's use worldwide, plus greater eco-awareness overall. However, our culture's toxics still threaten nature's amazingly diverse creatures, including the millions of birds that die globally each year from pesticides' effects. Eco-damage in turn harms us all, both on a physical level (because our lives depend on the web of life) and an emotional one (because this world becomes lonely without nature's companions).

I thought of this when I read about another study linking bird deaths with toxic insecticides. The researchers, led by Dr. Pierre Mineau, sought to understand why many Midwestern states have been experiencing notable drops in prairie bird populations, including ring-necked pheasants, horned larks, and sparrows. The hardest hit states are Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Montana, and Nebraska.

The study, funded by Environment Canada, considered a variety of possible causes, including habitat loss, long considered a key driver. However, the researchers concluded that the harm correlated even more strongly with toxic pesticides, especially neurotoxic organophosphates such as diazinon and chlorpyrifos.

Bird conservationists emphasize the need to still address issues of range management, urban development, and habitat loss. However, says Mineau, we must also reduce pesticides' harmful impacts "if we want to reverse, halt, or simply slow the very significant downward trend in grassland bird populations."

"First Bees, Now Birds," March 6, 2013, *Pesticide Action Network North America*, www.panna.org/blog/first-bees-now-birds
• The study is at <http://bit.ly/1pAbaC>.

ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. STEP is a project of the City of Sebastopol, implemented by local citizen volunteers. STEP's mission is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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