



THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

Safer Disinfecting in the Time of COVID-19

Disinfecting. It's become the new normal. Enter a store, use a hand sanitizer, pick up a sprayed cart or basket, increase home disinfecting.

But, a reader asks, How can I tell if these disinfectants are toxic or harmful to me and/or my family?

Of course, we want to protect ourselves from this stealthy virus. Still, we don't want the products we use to harm our health in the process!

This isn't a theoretical risk. Our increase in disinfecting has brought a notable increase in related calls to poison centers. People treated in ERs include a toddler who swallowed hand sanitizer and a woman struggling to breathe from toxic fumes.

Some people even report that they or their children had reactions after touching or sitting on grocery carts sprayed with disinfectant. (In one case, the store acknowledged that the sanitizer hadn't been diluted properly before being used on carts.)

Plus there's the possible long-term systemic illnesses that can arise from toxic exposure.

What You Can Do: Individuals

■ **First, to halt the virus' spread — yes, wear masks, keep at least 6 feet distance, and wash hands often, including when you get home.** These tips address COVID-19's top known transmission route (through the air when we're



close to others) and reduce transmission by touch. Disinfectants don't replace these steps and shouldn't be the first line of defense!

■ **Wash your hands with soap and water whenever possible** This is most effective at killing germs.

■ **If you can't do that, use a less-toxic hand sanitizer.** Rub hands together for 20 seconds. (More on choosing a product is below.)

■ **If a store offers or requires use of their hand sanitizer, read the ingredients first.** Or have your own handy! Use it after touching communal objects like door handles, handrails, faucets, and light switches.

■ **At the store, look for a cart without wet disinfectant, or ask the staff person to dry it.** These products should generally be dried before use. If you're shopping with young children, consider bringing a cart cover or other impermeable material to prevent direct cart contact.

■ **Wipe a safer disinfectant on commonly-used home surfaces,** such as door handles and knobs.

■ **Disinfect phones and other electronics per manufacturer's instructions.** You can usually clean cell phones, computers, laptops, tablets, and remote controls with disinfecting wipes that are 70% alcohol. Let them air dry.

■ **Not everything needs to be disinfected.** Some items can just be cleaned. For instance, don't disinfect children's items, especially those that they'll put in their mouths.

Local Toxics Disposal

■ **To discard your household toxics safely, bring them to the Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Facility.** It's at 500 Mecham Road, between Cotati and Petaluma, and is open Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, 7:30am to 2:30pm.

■ **Check the Zero Waste Sonoma website** (www.zerowastesonoma.gov) for more information on this, or to see what city HHW Collection Events are currently scheduled. Or call 707/565-3375 or 707/364-6927.

■ **Share this information with others.**

Buying Hand Sanitizers

■ **Look for hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol.** Organic ingredients are a nice bonus.

■ **Avoid products with complex chemical ingredients.** These aren't needed for effectiveness. Even just rubbing alcohol and aloe vera will work (when combined appropriately). **Also skip products with vague "fragrances,"** which can hide toxics.

■ **Explore the online hand sanitizer database from the Environmental Working Group (EWG).** It ranks common products from best to worst. You can also get information by brand. www.ewg.org/skindeep/browse/category/hand_sanitizer

■ **Buy local products at locally-owned stores.** Let's support our area's small businesses so that they'll be around for us in the future.

Buying & Using Disinfectants

■ **Avoid bleach or products that contain it. (It can also be listed as sodium hypochlorite.)** This is one of the most commonly-misused chemicals, and a big source of increased household poisonings during this pandemic. It's linked to harm to our skin and respiratory systems, and the environment. When improperly mixed with other cleaners or acids, it can be fatally poisonous.

See *Disinfecting*, over

Disinfecting, continued

For instance, the woman mentioned earlier had heard someone say that people should clean all their groceries. So she filled her sink with bleach, vinegar, and hot water, then soaked her produce. Unfortunately, bleach and vinegar release toxic chlorine gas. She had difficulty breathing, called 911, and was rushed to the ER for (successful) care.

■ **Avoid products with quaternary ammonium compounds (also known as quats).** They're linked to asthma and suspected of causing reproductive toxicity and birth defects in humans. They're often in products labeled "antibacterial" and are way stronger than most homes need. Get more tips for identifying them at www.bit.ly/3k00N1N.

■ **Look for products with these safer active ingredients:** Hydrogen peroxide, Ethyl alcohol (etha-

no), Citric acid, L-lactic acid, Caprylic acid (octanoic acid), Thymol.

■ **Check out EWG's disinfectant database,** which lists products ranked from best to worst. You can also search for a specific product or brand. www.ewg.org/guides/subcategories/67-Disinfectant

■ **Follow product label directions.** Don't just do what some non-expert says online. It can be dangerous! Wear needed protective gear. Ensure adequate ventilation. Store products out of reach of children. Don't use materials on food or bodies that aren't labeled for that!

■ **You can also disinfect with 3% household-strength hydrogen peroxide.** Clean dirt off first. Don't mix hydrogen peroxide with vinegar; that can form a caustic acid.

■ **For dishware,** use the sanitizing setting on your dishwasher.

What You Can Do: Businesses

■ **Be cautious about the toxic products you use.** Avoid using ones that are more toxic than needed, or applying more than is needed.

Be sure staff has proper training, supplies, and protective equipment before applying disinfectant products, especially with spaces and items used by staff or customers.

You can get more information at these links: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/pdf/reopening_america_guidance.pdf • www.livingbuilding.kend.edafund.org/2020/06/23/concerns-rise-about-toxic-disinfectants-in-buildings-covid-19 • www.rila.org/coronavirus-resources-for-retailers/covid-19-faq-on-sanitation-disinfectant-for-sale.

SOURCES: www.webmd.com/lung/news/20200421/disinfectant-linked-poisoning-rise-amid-covid19#1 • www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6916e1.htm • www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Walmart-chemical-burns-disinfected-carts-COVID19-15391572.php

Disclaimer: This newsletter offers general summary content for informational purposes only. It is not intended as medical advice. Please do your own research on topics of interest to you, and consult with your medical professional to make appropriate choices for your particular health situation.

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 • **Want to detox your holidays? Got a pest problem? Or a toxics question?**
 • **The STEP Online Index can help!** It's easy to look up your topic and find our well-researched, condensed, and useful information—to help you get up-to-speed and into action. It also makes it easy to share this information!
 • www.healthyworld.org/STEP
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Good News!

In our Sept./Oct. issue, we invited you to support three California bills designed to reduce our shared toxic exposure.

And now we have good news. All three bills were passed by the California legislature and signed into law by Governor Newsom! As a result, we'll reduce our collective toxic exposure and thus health harm. And, if you acted to support these bills, or the groups working for them, you helped make this happen!

I hope that this encourages you to see that together we can improve the shared circumstances of our lives. And I hope you feel inspired to look for more opportunities to be part of positive changes in the world!

These are the three bills:

■ **The California Toxic-Free Cosmetics Act (AB 2762).** Bans 24 toxic chemicals linked to serious illnesses from cosmetics and personal care products sold in California.

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) says, "This bill is likely to have national implications." That's because California is such a large market, and once a manufacturer meets our standards, it'll likely sell that reformulated product in the rest of the U.S. too.

■ **The California Cosmetic Fragrance and Flavor Right to Know Act (SB 312).** This pioneering bill requires public disclosure of toxic fragrance and flavor chemicals hiding in beauty and personal care products sold in California. This will make it easier for us to choose safer products!

■ **The California PFAS-Free Firefighting Foam Act (SB 1044).** This will protect firefighters (and all of us) from toxic PFAS-based firefighting foams, and move us to more safe, effective, and affordable alternatives. According to EWG, viable non-PFAS alternatives are already on the market, are used all over the world, and meet internationally accepted certifications and approvals.

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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