

Consumer Guide

Clean and Decorate a Natural Home

These 30 tips help make your house a place where good health flourishes.

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YOU TAKE TIME AND EFFORT to ensure that the food you eat, the supplements you take, and the medical care you receive all benefit your health. So it makes sense to ensure that your home—the refuge for you and your family—is good for you, too. You’ll be relieved to hear that making your home healthier doesn’t have to involve drastic renovations, says environmental health consultant Debra Lynn Dadd. In fact, she says, some of the most important changes you can make to your house are the simplest and least expensive.

From Dadd and other experts, we gathered easy ideas for nontoxic cleaning and decorating in the rooms where you spend most of your time: the bedroom, kitchen, bathroom, and living room.

The Bedroom

You spend about one-third of your life in your bedroom. “So if there’s only one room in your house you’re going to focus on making more healthful, make it your bedroom,” Dadd says.

Eliminate EMFs

Some researchers believe electromagnetic fields (EMFs)—created by electrical appliances, including alarm clocks, lamps, electric blankets, and



Bedsheets are commonly treated with formaldehyde resin to make them stain- and wrinkle-resistant. Formaldehyde, a carcinogen, is also linked to insomnia.

televisions—could trigger behavior changes, memory loss, and health problems like cancer. But reducing your risk may be as simple as rearranging your bedroom. EMFs grow weaker with distance, so move appliances like clock radios and televisions seven to eight feet away from your bed. (If you prefer to keep a clock on your bedside table, consider battery-powered or wind-up versions.) If you

use an electric blanket, click it on only to preheat the bed before you get in, and then unplug it.

Select Better Sheets

Many sheets and blankets are made with polyester or acrylic, plastics that, when heated by your body, can emit gases that irritate your skin and eyes. Even 100 percent cotton sheets are commonly treated with formaldehyde resin to make them stain- and wrinkle-resistant. Classified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a carcinogen, formaldehyde is also blamed for problems including insomnia. And it’s difficult to remove from sheets. “It decreases each time you wash them, but it never completely goes away,” Dadd says. To avoid formaldehyde, don’t buy sheets that say “easy-care” or “permanent press” on the label. Or consider untreated organic cotton sheets; one source is Real Goods (\$32 to \$202; 800-762-7325; www.realgoods.com). Cotton flannel or jersey sheets are another healthy option because they’re not treated with chemicals.

Consider This

Our Healthy Home Experts

ANNIE BERTHOLD-BOND of Rhinebeck, N.Y., is the author of *Better Basics for the Home* (Three Rivers Press, 1999) and other books on environmental housekeeping.

DAN CHIRAS, PH.D., is a renewable energy expert who lives in Evergreen, Colo. He has written several books about natural home building, including *The Natural House* (Chelsea Green, 2000).

DEBRA LYNN DADD, an environmental health consultant in Forest Knolls, Calif., wrote *Home Safe Home* (Tarcher, 1997). She is a member of the *Natural Health* advisory board.

RUSSELL GREENFIELD, M.D., is the medical director for Carolinas Integrative Health in Charlotte, N.C., and a visiting assistant professor at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson.

SANDY MAINE of Potsdam, N.Y., wrote *Clean, Naturally* (Interweave Press, 2001), and founded SunFeather Natural Soap Company.



Quick Tip

Turning off the lights when you leave a room, even just for a few minutes, can save considerable energy and reduce lighting costs.

Launder Your Linens Safely

Because you spend hours in bed, wash bedsheets in a dye- and perfume-free detergent to reduce your exposure to these ingredients. Natural home writer Annie Berthold-Bond recommends two dye- and perfume-free products: Seventh Generation Free & Clear Natural Liquid Laundry Deter-

gent (50 ounces; \$5; 800-456-1191; www.seventhgen.com) and Ecover Natural Laundry Liquid (53 ounces; \$8; 800-449-4925; www.ecover.com). Or make your own gentle soap for sheets, says natural housekeeping expert Sandy Maine. This recipe, from her book *Clean, Naturally* (Interweave Press, 2001) includes lavender to help you sleep. Mix ¼ cup clay powder (available at natural food stores) and 2 tablespoons lavender essential oil (*Lavandula angustifolia*) in a 2-quart container. Stir in 1 cup borax (also found at natural food stores), 2 cups baking soda, and ½ cup sodium lauryl sulfoacetate, a mild detergent derived from coconut oil, available from Maine's company, SunFeather Natural Soap Company (24 ounces; \$10; 315-

265-3648; www.sunsoap.com). This makes about 4 cups; use 1 cup per load.

Hang Healthy Curtains

Curtains made from natural fibers like cotton, linen, or silk are healthier than those made with polyester and acrylic, plastics that can emit irritating gases when heated by the sun. Dadd notes that many stores, like Eddie Bauer Home and Pottery Barn, now carry curtains made of natural fibers like cotton and linen, but organic fabrics (grown without chemical pesticides) are harder to find. Fair Trade Naturals offers a limited selection (\$41; 888-662-4367; www.algomaya.com/store). If you prefer blinds, choose metal or real wood over plastic, which will emit potentially irritating vapors into the air.

Getting Started

Get Clean the Healthy Way

The following five cleaners are the worst health offenders under your sink, according to Grace Ross Lewis, the Cincinnati-based author of *1,001 Chemicals in Everyday Products* (John Wiley, 1999), and Greg Marsh, an environmental chemist in Arvada, Colo. Read on to find safer alternatives.

1. Ammonia-Based Window Cleaners:

Listed on the EPA's list of toxic chemicals, ammonia irritates your skin and eyes and is a common ingredient in window cleaners. Make your own by mixing equal parts vinegar and water in a spray bottle. Or try the window cleaner from Heather's Natural & Organic Cleaning Products. It's made with apple cider vinegar and biodegradable detergents that cut through the smearable residue left behind by conventional window cleaners (16 ounces; \$4.88; 877-527-6601; www.jason-natural.com).

2. Chlorine Bleach: Ingesting as little as seven drops can cause irreparable damage to the esophagus and respira-

tory tract of a 150-pound person, Ross Lewis says. And if you accidentally mix bleach with ammonia, you will create a deadly gas. Look for a nonchlorine bleach made with hydrogen peroxide or borax, like Free & Clear Natural Non-

into the air where they can be inhaled or absorbed by your lungs, mouth, nose, and skin. Try safer cleaners made with citrus-based solvents, like Citra-Solv (16 ounces; \$8.99; 800-343-6588; www.citra-solv.com).



Chlorine Bleach from Seventh Generation (48 ounces; \$3.50; 800-456-1191; www.seventhgen.com).

3. Oven Cleaners: They contain the highly toxic duo of ammonia and corrosive lye, and are frequently sold as aerosols, which send tiny droplets

4. Drain Cleaners: They also contain lye, which can damage your skin, eyes, nose, and throat. Clear clogs with a drain snake from the hardware store, or pour a handful of baking soda and ½ cup white vinegar down the drain and cover tightly for 1 minute. Carbon dioxide bubbles produced by the reaction push the blockage through. Rinse with hot water.

5. Stain Removers: Some stain removers designed for fabrics and carpets contain petroleum distillates, which are harmful when inhaled and are frequently laced with carcinogenic substances produced in the refining process, like methylene chloride. For old or greasy stains, try a citrus-based solvent instead, like Citra-Solv (mentioned above).

Scent Your Storage

Homemade sachets add a pleasing fragrance to drawers and closets, and certain kinds repel moths, eliminating the need for mothballs. (Mothballs contain paradichlorobenzene, a volatile chemical that can cause damage to your kidneys and liver when inhaled for long periods.)

Berthold-Bond offers this recipe for a mothproofing sachet: Gently combine ½ cup each of dried lavender, rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*), and peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), 1 to 2 tablespoons cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*), and 1 tablespoon each of dried thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) and ginseng (*Panax ginseng*). To make small sachets, spoon this mixture into cotton teabags. For larger sachets, use cotton handkerchiefs or bandanas. Place the plant mixture in the middle, gather the edges together, and tie with a ribbon.

The Kitchen

You spend more time cleaning your kitchen than any other part of your house. Here's how to make the job easier and safer.

Be a Tidy Cook

To cut down on cleaning time and reduce your need for chemical cleaners, work to prevent messes in the first place. If you're preparing meat or fish, trim it in the original deli wrapper to keep bacteria-laden juices away from your counters. Use an over-the-sink cutting board to confine wastes to the sink. If you don't have a garbage disposal, keep your drain covered with a fine mesh strainer (available at most hardware stores) to prevent clogs. Use foil on your stove's burner pans. And because oven cleaners are one of the

most toxic cleaning products available today, place a cookie sheet covered with foil on your oven's bottom rack to catch spills.

Simplify Your Cleaners

You don't need several different chemical-laden products to keep your kitchen spotless. Dadd says she relies on five nontoxic ingredients to clean her kitchen: water, liquid soap, vinegar, baking soda, and a product called OxiClean. She uses hot water and soap to remove grease and dirt from surfaces like her stovetop, counters, and floor. One soap to consider is Dr. Bronner's

It's important to avoid conventional oven cleaners; they contain lye and ammonia, chemicals that can damage your respiratory tract if inhaled.



Pure-Castile Soap (8 ounces; \$3.50; 760-743-2211; www.drbronner.com). Dadd has even used this soap to wash her dishes. She uses a solution of equal parts vinegar and water to cut grease, keep kitchen windows clean, and disinfect counters. The baking soda

Quick Tip

To polish silver without chemical products, fill your kitchen sink with hot water, a sheet of aluminum foil, and a handful of salt. Add silver pieces. After three minutes, rinse and dry them.



works as a scouring powder and deodorizer. And for cleaning tough stains, Dadd swears by OxiClean (6 pounds; \$19.95; 877-836-5934; www.oxiclean.com). It's as effective as chlorine bleach, but made of sodium percarbonate and soda ash, so it's environmentally friendly and safe to use on any surface.

Don't Overdo Disinfectants

Don't use antibacterial products, says physician Russell Greenfield, M.D. You will cause bacteria to become resistant to the antibiotics designed to kill them. And if you have young kids, they must be exposed to some types of germs to develop strong immune systems, he adds. Instead of using these products, ask family members to wash their hands with plain soap and warm

water after using the bathroom, and clean your kitchen sponges and towels frequently. (Heat sponges in the microwave on high for one minute, or run them through the dishwasher daily.) These measures will prevent the spread of harmful microbes like

2 1/8" X 9 3/8"

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E. coli, so you'll usually need just water and plain soap to clean most surfaces. But be vigilant when you prepare raw meat, poultry, or fish, which may contain harmful bacteria. In that case, try this nontoxic cleaning trick: Pour 3 percent hydrogen peroxide (the concentration available in most drugstores) and white or apple cider vinegar into separate spray bottles. Spray one and then the other on the dirty surface, and then wipe them up with a clean sponge. (A 1996 article in *Science News* reported that using the ingredients separately killed more germs than mixing them together or using one ingredient alone.)



Before your bath, scrub the tub with a nontoxic cleaner made of liquid soap and baking soda.

Wipe Up Oven Spills Fast

If a dish in your oven does bubble over, wipe up the spill before you use the oven again, so it doesn't bake into a hard-to-remove crust. It's important to avoid conventional oven cleaners; they contain lye and ammonia, which can damage your respiratory tract if inhaled. For stubborn spills, Berthold-Bond sprinkles the oven floor with liberal amounts of baking soda, sprays it with water until it's very damp, and lets it sit overnight. In the morning, she wipes up the baking soda with a damp sponge. The grime usually comes off with one treatment.

Clean Messes with Club Soda

Along with nontoxic cleaners like soap and vinegar, keep club soda on hand. Thanks to its bubbles and high-alkaline mineral content, club soda dissolves dirt and loosens stains, making it an effective

cleaner for fabrics, including tablecloths and upholstery, and carpets. It works particularly well on acidic stains like wine, tomatoes, fruit juice, and coffee. Tackle spills soon after they happen. Blot the stain with a clean cloth, and then pour enough club soda on the stain to saturate the fabric. Blot again, and repeat until the stain is gone.

The Bathroom

Because your bathroom is the dampest and warmest area of your home, it's the most likely to grow mold and mildew. But keeping it clean doesn't have to involve harmful chemicals, our experts say.

Be Inhospitable to Mold

Mold and mildew are the bane of most bathrooms, but they can be largely avoided with a little ventilation, says environmental home expert Dan Chiras, Ph.D. Run a fan during your shower and for 20 minutes afterward to dry the air and prevent mold and mildew growth. If you don't have a built-in fan, open a window. Or, after your shower, open the bathroom door and run a portable fan just outside. To remove mold that takes root in grout and on walls and windowsills, mix equal parts water and borax (a mineral-based powder sold in natural food stores) in a spray bottle, suggests Dadd. Spray the solution on the moldy area and wipe it off immediately with a clean, damp sponge. Borax inhibits mold growth, so if you have a severe problem, spray mold-loving surfaces like walls with the borax solution and don't rinse it off.

Curtain Problems

Dadd and Chiras both advise against vinyl shower curtains and liners. They emit potentially carcinogenic plasticizers for years. Nylon curtains are an inexpensive option that resists mold, but as Dadd points out, they're not the best option because nylon is not a natural or biodegradable material. And both Dadd and Chiras admit that cotton curtains don't work well without vinyl liners because they're so absorbent and mildew easily. Hemp shower curtains may be the best alternative to cotton ones, Maine says. Hemp is more expensive than cotton, but doesn't grow mold as easily. Wash it every few months with nonchlorine bleach to further inhibit mold, Maine says. (One source for hemp shower curtains is Real Goods, which offers an organic, unbleached version for \$99; 800-762-7325; www.realgoods.com.)

Scrub Safely

Berthold-Bond makes her own nontoxic soft scrub for bathtubs, sinks, and shower stalls. To make her recipe, place $\frac{1}{2}$ cup baking soda in a bowl and slowly stir in enough liquid soap to achieve a frosting-like consistency. Use a sponge to apply the paste to the dirty surface, and then scrub and rinse. This recipe makes about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the soft scrub. Make only as much as you will use at one time; this mixture dries out easily.

Disinfect Your Toilet Naturally

Vinegar makes a good toilet cleaner and deodorizer because it disinfects and its acid neutralizes odors, says Berthold-Bond. She suggests combining 1 cup white vinegar and 1 cup water in a spray bottle. Spray along the inside rim of the



Quick Tip

When you buy ready-made cleaning products, choose brands that come in spray bottles or jugs instead of aerosol cans. Aerosols dispense tiny airborne particles that are easily absorbed by your skin, eyes, mouth, and lungs.

4 1/2" X 9 3/8"

toilet and after 15 minutes scrub with a toilet brush.

Remove Iron Stains

If you have iron rings in your toilet thanks to hard water, Berthold-Bond recommends that you try this nontoxic trick: Pour 1 cup borax into the bowl and let it sit overnight. In the morning, agitate the water with a toilet brush and flush. Repeat daily until the stain fades.

The Living Room

This room has more furniture, carpeting, and drapes than any other room in your home. As a result, your living room has more potential for indoor pollution than any other room.

Ventilate, Ventilate, Ventilate

New homes are tightly sealed against drafts to reduce heating and cooling costs. This saves money, but it's not so good for your health: Items like particleboard furniture, foam-stuffed furniture, and

synthetic carpeting release potentially harmful gases like formaldehyde for up to 10 years after you purchase them. When drafts are minimized or eliminated, no fresh air comes in from the outside to replace stale, chemical-laden air. If you live in an energy-efficient home, be conscious of the need for ventilation. If your home is equipped with exhaust fans, run them, and don't worry about caulking every nook and cranny. You may also want to open your windows for 15 minutes a day to bring in fresh air.

Houseplants can also help improve air quality in your living room, Dadd says. When they draw in carbon dioxide during photosynthesis, plants also pull airborne

Your living room has more potential for indoor pollution than any other room.



pollutants out of the air and replace them with a dose of fresh oxygen. Aloe vera, chrysanthemums, golden pothos, philodendrons, and spider plants are believed to be effective air filters. Placing just three or four plants in a 9- by 12-foot room can improve air quality, Dadd says.

Buy Nontoxic Paint

Oil-based paints (usually known as alkyd paints) contain volatile organic chemical (VOC) solvents like benzene, which is recognized by the EPA as a carcinogen, and toluene, which can cause nervous system changes and damage your liver and kidneys. Thanks to popular demand, low-VOC water-based latex paints are now available at paint stores, says Dadd. (General hardware and home improvement stores are less likely to carry them, but stores like Sherwin-Williams or

4 1/2" X 6 7/8"

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Glidden usually have a good selection.) When you're shopping for paint, check labels for the words "low-VOC."

Treat Your Carpets

Synthetic carpets outgas hazardous chemicals, including neurotoxic solvents from the carpet backing and formaldehyde, a carcinogen. "Carpet also acts like a sponge to absorb other chemicals used in the home and will outgas them

later," Chiras says.

If your carpet is less than eight years old, Dadd recommends sealing it with a finish like AFM's SafeChoice Carpet Seal, which forms an insoluble water- and odor-resistant barrier to prevent outgassing (1 gallon; \$20; 800-239-0321; www.afmsafecoat.com). Test a small patch, and then apply the seal to clean, damp carpet with a hand-held pump sprayer. Work the seal into the fibers with a clean push broom, and allow the carpet to dry completely.

Seal Your Furniture

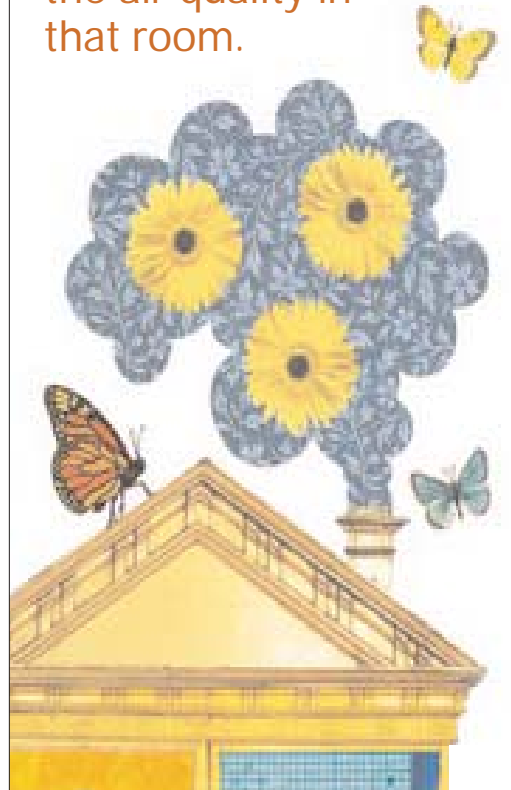
Particleboard and plywood furniture like bookshelves and desks are popular because they're inexpensive. But they release carcinogenic formaldehyde fumes for the first five years that you own them. If you own particleboard or plywood furniture that's newer than that, you can coat the unlaminated parts (including the insides of drawers, the undersides of shelves, and the back of bookshelves) with AFM's Safecoat Safe Seal, a sealant with a very tight molecular structure that prevents outgassing (1 gallon; \$30; 800-239-0321; www.afmsafecoat.com). The sealant will not work on laminated particleboard.

Give It a Polish

Most commercial furniture polishes come in aerosol form and may also contain harmful additives, including phenol and nitrobenzene, both of which are on the EPA's list of toxic chemicals. You can clean wood and protect it from drying but avoid those additives by rubbing plain mineral oil, olive oil, or any cooking oil

4 1/2" X 6 7/8"

Placing just three or four houseplants in a 9- by 12-foot room can help improve the air quality in that room.



4 1/2" X 9 3/8"

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Quick Tip

Need new furniture?

Buy unfinished wood and treat it yourself with water-based finishes labeled "low odor," "water clean-up," or "two-hour dry." Or visit yard sales or antique stores for furniture that's at least five years old (so it has already off-gassed).

sparingly (about a teaspoon at a time) on your wood furniture with a clean cloth. If you would like a lemon scent, add 1 teaspoon of lemon essential oil (*Citrus limon*) to 2 cups oil. Dadd actually started using mayonnaise on wood after finding the tip in an antique household manual. "It's easy and it works," Dadd says. "All I have to do is open a jar. But it has to be real mayonnaise and not a salad dressing like Miracle Whip," which contains unnecessary ingredients like spices. Apply a teaspoon-size dollop at a time, Dadd says.

Work on Windows

Many window cleaners can contain eye and skin irritants like ammonia, as well as additives that leave a waxy buildup. A mixture of equal parts vinegar and water combined in a spray bottle is a healthy

Cooking oils and mayonnaise make effective nontoxic furniture polishes.

alternative, but it may streak at first if you have used conventional products in the past. If this happens, add a squirt of dish soap to this mixture. Follow with a plain water-vinegar mix. Berthold-Bond suggests that you buy a small squeegee for windows at the hardware store to avoid wasting paper towels. ●

Julia Tolliver Maranan, a freelance writer in Ipswich, Mass., has sworn off bleach and is now relying on vinegar, baking soda, and borax for most of her cleaning.