

Detox Your Life

(Without Driving Yourself Nuts)

Dangerous chemicals have snuck into our lives—and our bodies. Protect yourself from their health-sapping effects with a few easy steps.

By Jan Sheehan

BPA. PERC. VOCs. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the veritable alphabet soup of chemicals hidden in everything from plastic containers to cleaning solutions to household furniture to grocery-store receipts (yeah, those can be toxic too).

It's true that long-term exposure to such nasties can raise your risk for everything from infertility to cancer. But there's no need to seal yourself in a sterile bubble (or, conversely, throw up your hands and ignore all the risks). "You can do a lot to reduce your toxin load," says *WH* advisor Renée Loux, author of *Easy Green Living*. "Some changes are so simple it doesn't make sense *not* to do them." Incorporating these six toxin-crushing steps into your life will help safeguard your health—and the planet.

#1 Say No to Paper Receipts

Nearly 40 percent of the printed slips you get after making a purchase—at stores, restaurants, ATMs, and the like—are coated with the chemical bisphenol A (BPA), per an Environmental Working Group study. The problem? BPA, also famously found in canned foods, has been linked to cancer, obesity, diabetes, infertility, and heart disease. "BPA is dusted onto receipt surfaces to activate printing dye; it can rub off on

your fingers in seconds and enter your bloodstream within hours," says study author Sonya Lunder, M.P.H. **Stay extra safe:** If you must get a receipt (say, to keep track of office expenses), ask for an e-mailed version. If you *have* to get a paper one, wash your hands as soon as possible with soap and water. It may also help to regularly chow down on folate-rich leafy greens such as spinach or kale. Duke University studies suggest that this might counteract the cellular damage done by BPA.

#2 Paint with Care

Pretty, deep tones may look sharp on your walls, but vivid paint can release dangerous gases called volatile organic compounds (VOCs), even months after it has dried. Used to keep colors from fading and separating, VOCs have been associated with neurological damage (brain fog, balance issues), infertility, and birth defects, says Walter Crinnion, N.D., chair of the environmental medicine department at the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine in Tempe, Arizona. (Use your nose as a guide: The stronger the smell of the paint, the more VOCs it contains.)

Stay extra safe: No matter what hue you choose, never paint a room unless you'll be able to open its windows for at least 24 straight hours

afterward. Be sure to always choose zero- or low-VOC paints (they should be clearly labeled) and skip redecorating altogether if you're pregnant or hoping to be anytime soon, says Carolyn Dean, M.D., N.D., coauthor of *The Complete Natural Medicine Guide to Women's Health*.

#3 Clear Your Air

Many spray or plug-in air fresheners hide a dirty secret: Along with scents, they emit hormone-disrupting chemicals called phthalates, which can cause infertility. The toxins have also been linked to obesity: "On average, the higher a person's phthalate level, the bigger her belt size," says Crinnion. Even "all-natural" air fresheners may contain phthalates—used to give scents staying power—according to the Natural Resources Defense Council. In fact, the stuff often goes unlisted on ingredients labels, hiding within the more general category of "fragrance." Avoid prepackaged air fresheners and opt for natural potpourri made from lemon peels and baking soda.

Stay extra safe: Research shows that houseplants can strip the surrounding air of harmful toxins. A-plus options include English ivy and philodendrons. Four to five pots per big room can do the trick, says Crinnion. (P.S. Cut flowers smell lovely but don't have detoxifying powers.)



#4 Rehab Your Closet

Breathing the fumes emitted from dry-cleaned clothes has been associated with dizziness, fatigue, headache, and vision problems. And not just fresh-out-of-the-wrapper clothes: A 2011 study in *Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry* found high levels of perchloroethylene (PERC), a potentially carcinogenic dry-cleaning solvent, on some clothes a week after they were cleaned (especially vulnerable: wool, polyester, and cotton materials). Tear off the plastic immediately and hang your threads outside or in the garage to air them out, says Loux.

Stay extra safe: Think twice before dry-cleaning or buying dry-clean-only clothes. When you must, seek out a "green cleaner," then double-check by asking if it uses PERC. (If your clothes come back with a chemical smell, it likely does.) Or learn to hand-wash delicate items—even some kinds of silks!—with cool water and gentle castile soap.

#5 Check Your Shelves

Many bookshelves are made from pressed wood (a.k.a. particleboard or fiberboard), which is actually millions of tiny wood bits held together with a glue that emits formaldehyde. Labeled a known carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, formaldehyde can also lead to headaches, skin rashes, or asthma, says Dean. If you can, invest in formaldehyde-free solid wood shelving. If that's too pricey, try plywood; yes, it's still pressed wood, but its thicker layers require less glue—and, therefore, less formaldehyde—to hold them together. Air out any new shelves outdoors or in the garage for at least three weeks before bringing them inside.

Stay extra safe: Consider opting for formaldehyde-free materials such as bamboo, eucalyptus, and corkboard to hold your stuff.



#6 Watch Where You Drive

Sitting in a drive-through lane heightens your exposure to toxic chemicals, says air-pollution expert Sumita Khatri, M.D., a pulmonologist at the Cleveland Clinic. Particles of stuff like benzene spewing from car exhaust pipes around you (including your own) can infiltrate your body and lead to irregular heartbeats, among other heart woes. If you must sit in a drive-through queue, idle with your windows closed.

Stay extra safe: Revisit the way you pump gas. "While gasoline isn't classified as a carcinogen, certain components of the fuel are, and these can be present in the fumes," says Robert Emery, Dr.P.H., a professor of occupational health at the University of Texas at Houston. Put as much distance between yourself and the pump as possible and always try to stand upwind. ■

THREE DETOX MYTHS, DEBUNKED

These practices, which promise to rid your body of toxins, offer more hype than health.

MYTH 1: Certain liquid diets can push out toxins.

Nope. No fad diet can eliminate harmful invaders faster than your built-in clean-up crew (the liver, kidneys, and colon). "The best 'cleansing' strategy is a proper diet, regular exercise, and not smoking," says Stephen Dahmer, M.D.

MYTH 2: Drinking loads of water detoxes the body.

H₂O hydrates the liver and kidneys and encourages toxins to leave the body via urination. However...guzzling excessively in the name of detoxing can be just plain dangerous. Symptoms of "water intoxication" include headache, fatigue, vomiting, and mental disorientation. "Drink nine eight-ounce glasses of water spaced throughout the day," says Connie Diekman, R.D.

MYTH 3: You can sweat out toxins with serious sauna time. It's true that a small amount of toxins can leave the body via perspiration, but keep this in mind: "Very heavy sweating can impair the body's natural detox system, making it less efficient," says Dahmer. You'll do more detoxing in the bathroom than you ever could in a sauna, he adds.