

Many common household chemicals are dangerous. They may be reasonably safe when used as directed, yet contain toxic chemicals or degrade over time into a more dangerous chemical. Here's a list of some of the most dangerous household chemicals, including the ingredients to watch for and the nature of the risk.

air fresheners - Air fresheners may contain any of a number of dangerous chemicals. Formaldehyde irritates the lungs and mucous membranes and may cause cancer. Petroleum distillates are flammable, irritate the eyes, skin, and lungs, and may cause fatal pulmonary edema in sensitive individuals. Some air fresheners contain p-dichlorobenzene, which is a toxic irritant. The aerosol propellants used in some products may be flammable and may cause nervous system damage if inhaled.

ammonia - Ammonia is a volatile compound that can irritate the respiratory system and mucous membranes if inhaled, can cause a chemical burn if it is spilled on skin, and will react with chlorinated products (e.g., bleach) to produce deadly chloramine gas.

antifreeze - Antifreeze is ethylene glycol, a chemical which is poisonous if swallowed. Breathing it can cause dizziness. Drinking antifreeze can cause serious brain, heart, kidney, and other internal organ damage. Ethylene glycol has a sweet flavor, so it is attractive to kids and pets. Antifreeze typically contains a chemical to make it taste bad, but the flavor is not always a sufficient deterrent. The sweet smell is enough to lure pets.

bleach - Household bleach contains sodium hypochlorite, a chemical that can cause irritation and damage to the skin and respiratory system if inhaled or spilled on the skin. Never mix bleach with ammonia or with toilet bowl cleaners or drain cleaners, as dangerous and possibly deadly fumes may be produced.

drain cleaners - Drain cleaners typically contain lye (sodium hydroxide) or sulfuric acid. Either chemical is capable of causing an extremely serious chemical burn if splashed on the skin. They are toxic to drink. Splashing drain cleaner in the eyes may cause blindness.

laundry detergent - Laundry detergents contain a variety of chemicals. Ingestion of cationic agents may cause nausea, vomiting, convulsion, and coma. Non-ionic detergents are irritants. Many people experience chemical sensitivity to dyes and perfumes present in some detergents.

mothballs - Mothballs are either p-dichlorobenzene or naphthalene. Both chemicals are toxic and known to cause dizziness, headaches, and irritation to the eyes, skin, and respiratory system. Prolonged exposure can lead to liver damage and cataract formation.

motor oil - Exposure to the hydrocarbons in motor oil can cause cancer. Many people are unaware that motor oil contains heavy metals, which can damage the nervous system and other organ systems.

oven cleaner - The danger from oven cleaner depends on its composition. Some oven cleaners contain sodium hydroxide or potassium hydroxide, which are extremely corrosive strong bases. These chemicals can be deadly if swallowed. They can cause chemical burns on the skin or in the lungs if the fumes are inhaled.

rat poison - Rat poisons (rodenticides) are less lethal than they used to be, but remain poisonous to people and pets. Most rodenticides contain warfarin, a chemical which causes internal bleeding if ingested.

windshield wiper fluid - Wiper fluid is toxic if you drink it, plus some of the poisonous chemicals are absorbed through skin, so it is toxic to touch. Swallowing ethylene glycol can cause brain, heart, and kidney damage, and possibly death. Inhalation can cause dizziness. The methanol in wiper fluid can be absorbed through the skin, inhaled, or ingested. Methanol damages brain, liver, and kidneys and can cause blindness. The isopropyl alcohol acts as a central nervous system depressant, causing drowsiness, unconsciousness, and potentially death.