

Parents

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Chemicals in everyday products could make your kids sick. But there are easy ways to stay safe.

THE HIDDEN Toxins IN YOUR HOME

By Rebecca Kahlenberg

A few years ago, Brenda Jones hired a lawn-care company to get rid of the weeds and bugs that had taken over the yard of her home in Bradenton, Florida. But shortly after the lawn was sprayed, everyone in her family started feeling sick. Brenda got a burning sensation in her throat and began coughing. Her children, Jeffrey and Kara, who were 7 and 3, complained of headaches and nausea. Her husband, Wayne, thought he had the flu. Even the family dog, Amos, was vomiting and sneezing.

Several days later, their family doctor concluded that their symptoms had been caused by the pesticides the lawn company had used. "We were shocked," says Brenda, who has vowed never to use lawn chemicals again. "We thought we were protecting our kids from harmful insects, not doing something that could hurt them."

Fortunately, the Joneses' experience is not very common. Most people do not have such severe reactions to the weed killers widely used on suburban lawns. But their story underscores an issue of growing concern to environmental health experts: the fact that many common chemicals found in and around the average American home can be harmful to humans—especially to babies and young children.

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Possible Dangers: Vinyl contains chemicals that can put kids at higher risk of developing asthma, cancer, and organ damage. According to the Washington, D.C.-based Healthy Building Network (HBN), an environmental-advocacy organization, a 2002 study of more than 10,000 Swedish children found that when a PVC vinyl floor was damp, children who were exposed to it experienced increased asthmatic symptoms.

Safety Steps: Whenever possible, avoid products that contain PVC. (Check labels or ask the manufacturer whether the product contains vinyl, or choose ones that clearly say they don't.) Buy only rubber or silicone pacifiers and teething rings, which are a safer alternative to PVC, recommends Marge Kelly, a spokesperson for HBN. (Most major baby-product companies in the U.S. have discontinued using vinyl in their infant-oriented toys, but look for PVC-free labeling just to be sure.) Cover a vinyl floor with a mat or an area rug if children play there. Dispose of any soft plastic vinyl toys that your child sucks or chews on. In the bathroom, opt for cloth, nylon, or PVC-free shower curtains, which are widely available.

Vinyl, used in flooring and window blinds, can put children at increased risk of asthma, cancer, and organ damage.

Pressure-treated wood

Most pressure-treated wood, also called chromated copper arsenate (CCA) treated wood, contains a preservative made with arsenic, a heavy metal that has been shown to cause cancer. For the past 50 years, this wood was used to make decks, picnic tables, and playground equipment. Though the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) banned the sale of CCA-treated wood as of January 2004, it's still present in many homes, playgrounds, and recreation areas.

Possible Dangers: There's some evidence to suggest that children who spend a lot of time on pressure-treated surfaces may ingest or absorb arsenic, a known carcinogen. A 2003 study commissioned by the EPA looked at kids who live in warm-weather climates and who play at least several times a week year-round on arsenic-treated structures. These children were found to have a higher cancer risk than kids who have less frequent exposure. Moreover, the Environmental Working Group (EWG), a nonprofit research organization in Washington, D.C., conducted its own research and found an increased lung-, skin-, and bladder-cancer risk in children who played on CCA-wood equipment. *Continued on page 220*

ECO-FRIENDLY PRODUCTS Safer alternatives are available—at a price.

 Victor pest killer, made with natural mint oils, \$7.	 Seventh Generation biodegradable laundry soap, \$14 for 100 oz.	 Simple Green cleaner containing no harmful chemicals, \$5 for 10 oz.	 Armstrong all-natural flooring, starting at \$3 per square foot.	 Method non-toxic shower and tub cleaner, \$4 for 28 oz.
 Method mint-scented spray for glass and windows, \$4 for 28 oz.	 Saler brand chemical-free traps to capture kitchen critters, \$7.	 Benjamin Moore low-odor indoor paint, \$25 per gallon.	 Cockadee Duo chemical-free fertilizer, \$29 for 40 lbs.	 Seventh Generation bathroom cleaner, \$4 for 32 oz.