How to read a cleaning/disinfecting product label

Many people mistakenly think that if a cleaning, sanitizing, or disinfecting product is sold to the public it has been shown to be safe by the government. However, cleaning products are not reviewed by the government for their effects on human health or the environment.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires that products labeled as sanitizers or disinfectants do kill the germs that the product label claims to kill, but the EPA does not evaluate all possible health risks to the users of these products.

Consumers who want to purchase safer products have two choices:

❶ **They can buy a product that has been reviewed by a third party who certifies that it is safer.**

◆ Green Seal, UL ECOLOGO® and the EPA's Safer Choice Program all certify safer cleaning products (see Resources). Products that have been certified carry the certifying group's logo on the label.

| Design for the Environment | Green Seal | Safer Choice | UL ECOLOGO® |

◆ The EPA's Design for the Environment Safer Disinfectants Program is the only program that can legally certify disinfecting

products that are less hazardous for human health and the environment in the U.S. If you see the DfE logo on an EPA-registered antimicrobial pesticide (disinfectant) label, the product has met EPA's rules for safer disinfectants.

❷ **They can read a product's label and choose products that have safer ingredients.**

When you read a label, keep in mind that:

◆ Many products claims they are "green" or environmentally friendly" but these terms have no legal meaning and are not a good reason to buy a product.

◆ There are no requirements for manufacturers to list ingredients for cleaning products. Disinfectants and sanitizers are only required to list the chemicals (the active ingredients) that kill germs and which germs they kill.

◆ When ingredients are listed on a product's label, they are not necessarily listed in order of how much of the ingredient the product contains.
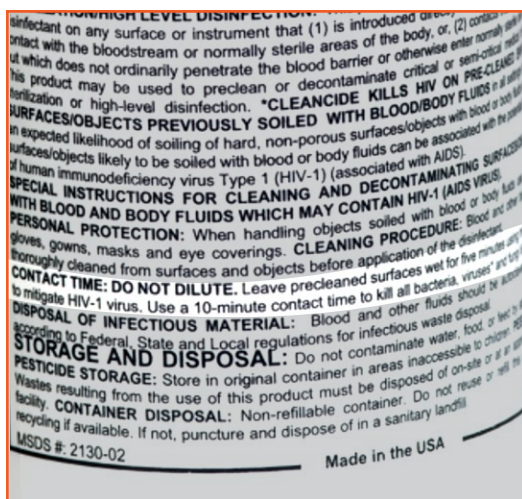
 Things to look for on a product label:

◆ Check for full disclosure of ingredients. Manufacturers who list all their ingredients on the label give you more power to make informed decisions.

We disclose all ingredients: aqua, caprylyl/myristyl glucoside*, sodium gluconate*, methylisothiazolinone and benzisothiazolinone (synthetic). Trace materials are commonly present in cleaning product ingredients. *Plant-derived. No phosphates. Full ingredient descriptions available online at seventhgeneration.com.
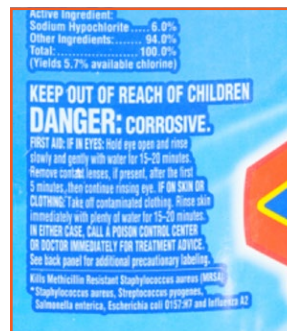
◆ If a product does not list its ingredients, you can search online for the product's SDS (Safety Data Sheet). This sheet will provide you with a lot of useful information, including the product's potential health hazards.

◆ Look at the directions. The directions will tell you how to use the product so it is effective. For example, how long do you leave it on the surface? What surfaces can it be used on? What do you use to clean it off? Is rinsing necessary?
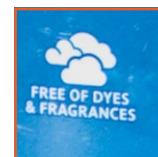

◆ Look for the signal word. "Signal words" on the label tell you how hazardous the product is (though it doesn't tell you about the long-term health hazards of using the product over many months or years). It's often in large print and in bold. Choose a

product with a signal word of CAUTION, not DANGER or WARNING. Products with no signal word are the safest This section will usually say if the product is an eye irritant, a skin irritant, harmful if swallowed, has contents under pressure, or needs to be used in a well-ventilated area.

◆ Although some products that say fragrance-free on the label actually do contain fragrances that mask other smells, it is still best to choose a product that says it is fragrance free.

◆ Look for non-aerosol products. These are safer for your lungs and for the environment.

◆ Look for the first aid section. This section will tell you what to do if you or a child swallow the product or get it in your eyes or on your skin.

◆ The label should state how the product should be stored. Always keep cleaning, sanitizing, and disinfecting products locked and out of reach of children and animals.

Resources

UL ECOLOGO® Certification
EPA Design for the Environment Safer Disinfectants Program
EPA Safer Choice
Green Seal
Green Cleaning, Sanitizing, and Disinfecting: A Toolkit for Early Care and Education

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WESTERN STATES PEHSU
Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit