

Top Ten Ways to Protect Yourself from Toxins

By Katie Stage, ND

When feeling sluggish, having trouble losing weight, or experiencing symptoms such as mental fogginess, aches and pains, mood changes, or poor immunity, many people consider doing a cleanse. Detoxifying is an excellent way to strengthen your body's innate healing response and feel more energy. However, avoidance of common toxins is as important as cleansing, since continuous exposure contributes to the very build up of toxins from which you are cleansing. This guide will help you remove common toxins from your home, and provides health-promoting alternatives.

Take off your shoes when inside your house:

Think of all the junk our shoes touch as we live our life – walking on dirty streets, over pollen, dust, mold, and much worse! Why drag the remnants of this through your living areas, where you relax, eat, and sleep?

Removing shoes is a simple way to reduce your exposure to environmental toxins and pollutants. Designate an area just inside your front door for shoes, and consider some sort of storage item (small shelf or cabinet) to hold the shoes and reduce clutter. If your feet get cold, you can have a pair of inside-only slippers ready to go in this same area.

Avoid fish and seafood that is high in mercury:

An extremely common source of exposure to mercury doesn't relate to thermometers or other technical items – it is in the fish we eat. And while fish is generally an incredibly healthy food and an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids, unfortunately, big fish tend to bio-accumulate the mercury in the environment, making them a source of unhealthy levels of this toxin.

The fish most commonly contaminated are shark, swordfish, king mackerel, tuna, orange roughy, sea bass, marlin, Gulf coast oysters, lobster, and halibut. Pregnant women should avoid these fish completely, and everyone else should limit or avoid them.

A good alternative is wild salmon, which can be purchased frozen or canned. The package should state “wild” and Alaskan or Pacific salmon will usually be labeled as King (Chinook), Red (Sockeye), or Silver (Coho) Salmon. If that distinction is not given, or if the package does not state “wild” it is farmed (or Atlantic) salmon being passed off as Alaskan. This link will take you to a list of fish and their levels of mercury contamination, as well as a “tuna calculator” which can help you

determine how much tuna you can safely eat: <http://www.ewg.org/safefishlist>

Farmed salmon is full of contaminants including PCBs, and should be avoided. http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/SeafoodWatch/web/sfw_factsheet.aspx?fid=133

Air out our your dry cleaning:

The chemicals used to dry clean clothes are actually quite toxic. Residue from them is then trapped under the plastic used to wrap up your dry cleaning. Many people just keep the plastic over their clothes until they are ready to wear them, but this will just transfer that residue to your closet – usually close to your bedroom, where you will inhale toxins as you sleep. A better idea is to air your dry cleaning out in the garage, your car trunk, or an unused hall of your house for at least 7 days. You might also consider trying an organic dry cleaner: there are more and more of these appearing through the valley, and their prices are generally comparable to conventional dry cleaners.

Make produce selections wisely:

Most people are aware of contamination of produce and other foods with pesticides. However, it can be difficult and prohibitively expensive to only eat organic. Consider purchasing your produce from a farmer's market or CSA (community supported agriculture): most foods grown on this scale are not sprayed, even if they do not have the organic certification (always ask to confirm this).

You can also reference this chart, which shows the “clean 15” – 15 least-sprayed foods, which can be eaten conventionally, and the “dirty dozen” – the 12 most-contaminated foods, which should be eaten organic.

<http://static.ewg.org/reports/2012/foodnews/pdf/2012-EWGPesticideGuide.pdf>

You can also download an app so you always have this information on your smart phone: <http://www.ewg.org/foodnews/guide/>

Please note that it is incredibly important to eat high amounts of fruits and vegetables, and if you do not have access to, or cannot afford organic, the benefits of eating the produce outweigh the potential harm.

Keep your air clean:

Replace home air filters every 1–3 months with high quality pleated filters (rated MERV 7–9). This will also make your air-conditioner/heater work more efficiently, saving you money on your electrical bill.

I do see a lot of patients adversely affected by Phoenix's poor quality air. We are a very large city, with lots of construction, dust and pollen, and hydrocarbons and other toxins from the high number of automobiles. These pollutants can become more toxic in our high temperatures, and get trapped in our Valley, making it particularly irritating at best, harmful at worst. Consider purchasing a high quality air filter for your home, and keeping it in a room where you spend lots of time, such as your bedroom. IQ Air and Blue Air are examples of good purifiers which have enough CFM (cubic feet of air purified each minute) to clear the air in your bedroom at least once every 30 minutes.

Avoid hormones and contaminants in your beef and dairy:

Agriculture today is a far cry from the idyllic pictures of cattle grazing on grass that many of us picture. Cows are commonly given natural and artificial growth hormones to increase milk production. These hormones remain present in the cow's milk and meat, and remain in manure, contaminating surface and groundwater via. Recent studies have demonstrated that exposure to hormones has a substantial effect on the gender and reproductive capacity of fish, throwing off their natural cycle. The growth and sex hormones present in beef and dairy have been implicated in the increasingly early onset of puberty, as well as in breast and other hormone-dependent cancers. The European Union does not allow the use of hormones in cattle production and has actually prohibited the import of hormone-treated beef since 1988, which means it has banned all beef imports from the US.

Therefore, the cleanest type of beef is organic. Grass fed beef is also typically free of hormones, since these are not necessary when cows are pastured and able to eat the diet of their natural habitat. Grass fed and organic beef is becoming increasingly available, even in conventional supermarkets. Many also carry bison, which is grass fed.

The hormones fed to cows concentrate in their milk, so organic dairy is also important. Butter tends to be an especially concentrated reservoir – consider organic butter, or alternatives such as goat butter, coconut butter, or Earth's balance (contains no dairy).

Eliminate exposure to hormones through plastics:

BPA has been in the news recently, and more and more manufacturers have pledged to remove it from their products. The reason for this is that BPA is a hormone disruptor, implicated in obesity, early puberty, and behavioral disorders such as hyperactivity.

BPA is used to make hard plastics, such as the type of durable plastic bottles used for hiking. It is also commonly in baby bottles (most manufactures are now removing BPA from at least baby products) and in the lining of many canned foods. When purchasing hard plastic items or canned foods, look for “BPA free” on the label or packaging.

Avoid heating plastics. This breaks down the components of the plastic and it is leached into the item that the plastic contained. This means not using your microwave or oven to heat Tupperware: consider placing portions on dinner plates and heating the food individually. You should also not cover the food with plastic wrap when warming it up.

Flexible plastic contains phthalates, which are used to soften plastics and vinyl and are also used as solvents. Phthalates are endocrine disruptors, and have been linked to reduced sperm counts, testicular atrophy, and liver cancer. The EPA even regulates phthalates as air and water pollutants. Many people drink bottled water for its health benefits, but do not realize that those bottles can cause health problems. Reusing the bottles, and letting them become hot – such as when the bottles sit in a hot car – allows the plastic to break down and allows more toxins to leech into the water.

Consider purchasing a stainless steel, glass, or BPA-free plastic, reusable bottle, which also reduces waste.

Avoid toxic vinyl:

PVC (Polyvinyl chloride) contains phthalates (see above). When incinerated, PVC produces dioxin, which can cause cancer and reproductive disorders. Dioxin persists in the soil for a very long time, so a single fire can lead to long-lasting health impacts. PVC products such as vinyl flooring may also be contained with lead or toxic glues. Safer flooring options include cork, bamboo, or wood.

You can also look to replace smaller vinyl items in your house, such as vinyl shower curtains, with cloth or nylon.

Avoid dangerous chemicals in your skin care products:

Many common – even “natural” – skin care product contain chemicals that can harm or irritate. Discontinue use of products that contain: benzoic acid, BHA, BHT, DMDM hydantoin, fragrances, dyes, parfum, imidazolidinyl urea, sodium lauryl (laureth) sulfate, nonylphenol ethoxylates, phosphates, anything ending in “paraben”, polyethylene glycol and anything ending in “eth”.

You can search for safe cosmetics, sunscreens, and other personal care products in the Skin Deep database, <http://www.ewg.org/skindeep/>. Brands that tend to be free of harmful additives include Tom's of Maine, Burt's Bee's, JASON, Desert Essence Organics, and DeVita.

Reduce exposure to PBDEs (fire retardants):

Polybrominated diphenylethers (PBDEs) are a class of toxic chemicals widely used to prevent the spread of fire and are commonly found in products such as foam (mattresses, couches/chairs), the padding below your carpet, seats in vehicles, child car seats, office chairs, and other foam items purchased before 2005. Studies show that exposure to even small amounts of PBDEs can cause neurological deficits (memory problems, motor skills, hearing problems), behavior changes, and reproductive system disruption.

You can minimize exposure by replacing items with ripped or exposed foam, removing old carpet with care (use a HEPA-filter vacuum for small debris), and preventing children from mouthing foam or electronic items, which contain Deca, a form of PBDE.

Another way to avoid PBDEs is to purchase an organic or natural latex mattress. While definitely more expensive than a conventional mattress, these are not only free from flame-retardants but also from the toxins commonly sprayed on conventional cotton. When you consider that about 1/3 of your life will be spent on your mattress, you may decide the additional cost is worthwhile. [Eco Clean](#), a store in Phoenix, has a good selection of organic and natural latex mattresses as well as organic bedding and towels, non-toxic cleaning items and flooring.