**Keeping yourself safe around chemicals**

Chances are at some point every day you come into contact with a range of household chemical products – from detergents, cleaners, garden sprays, solvents, petrol, spa and pool cleaners and even some pet treatments – and you use them without thinking much beyond the job they’re helping you get done.

And that’s as it should be. These types of products make our lives simpler and easier, and help us manage our households in multiple ways. But it’s important they’re used properly and stored wisely, to help minimise any potential risks they may pose to others, or our environment.

Though you may not immediately think of them in this way, chemical products like those listed here are classified as hazardous substances. They need to be used safely and stored wisely:

* Household cleaners – sprays, detergents, washing powders etc
* Garden products – including insecticides, weed sprays, etc
* Cosmetics labelled as ‘organic’ and ‘environmentally friendly’ can also be hazardous if swallowed
* Fuels, such as LPG for barbeques and petrol stored for lawnmowers
* Paints and paint thinners or solvents
* Fireworks
* Facepaints and children’s art products
* Spa and pool chemicals
* Poisons (eg: insecticides or baits for eradicating pests and insects)
* Pet products such as flea and mite treatments

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**Why you need to take extra care around these products**

These products are chemical substances and they need to be handled with care. If you accidently inhale, ingest or mishandle them, you could get sick. How sick and what symptoms you might experience depends on the type or amount of the substance you’ve come into contact with. Symptoms may range from skin irritations, sore eyes or headaches to breathing difficulties, burns or vomiting to serious or life-threatening conditions.

For urgent advice on poisoning, contact the National Poisons Centre on 0800 Poison or 0800 764 766.

Long-term storage or misuse of BBQ fuels, gas bottles, flammable products or pressurised containers may cause a fire or an explosion that could result in loss of property, injury – or worse.

**Read the label**

The label offers all the information you need to keep yourself safe. For instance, it will list any protective clothing or gear you may need to use, whether the products can be used inside and outside, or what special precautions you may need to take.

Following the label instructions ensures you can use these products safely.

The products we’ve listed above will sometimes have the words *Danger*, *Warning*, *Poison* or *Caution* on their labelling as a warning that you will need to take extra care with them. They may also include information about the harm the product may cause, to you or the environment, if not used correctly, how to protect yourself and what to do in an emergency. It may also tell you how to best store and dispose of the product.

**Think about storage sites**

Sheds and garages are often collection points for a variety of chemical products used for gardening, washing the car, or for heavy-duty house maintenance such as pool and spa cleaners. Keep these products out of reach and, in the case of pool and spa cleaners, keep them away from other chemicals. If you use insecticides or baits, don’t apply or store them in areas that that are accessible to children or pets.

**Keep products in their original containers**

Some chemical products are not intended to be mixed and could cause an adverse reaction. Moving a product from its original container into, say, a disused water or drink bottle or into an old biscuit tin, is dangerous for many reasons;

* It means you lose the storage and usage instructions
* It increases the potential for somebody to mistake the contents of a drink bottle
* Many chemicals have child-resistant lids, so if they are moved into another container children may get into them more easily.

**Watch out for flammable products and pressurised containers**

Store flammable products, such as petrol or some aerosol products which can produce flammable vapours, in a cool place away from other heat sources and always out of reach of children. Follow label instructions for using and storing fireworks (or better still go to a public display).

**Crayons and children’s paints**

* Always use good quality non-toxic paints and crayons
* Teach children not to put them in their mouths
* Always wash their hands after using them
* Opt to buy well-known brands from reputable stores that you trust.

**Pet products**

* Flea and mite treatments can pose risks for you and your pet if they are ingested accidently or used incorrectly
* Always read the label
* As with other medicines and chemicals, keep them locked away and out of reach.

**Top tips for safe handling**

* If you’re not sure, cover up (use goggles, or gloves or long-sleeves/trousers) when using heavy-duty cleaners or sprays. (This is also important if you’re working with potting mixes, though they’re not hazardous substances)
* Use a face mask suitable for protecting against chemicals, and safety glasses, if you’re spraying, using paints or strippers
* Keep doors or windows open to ensure your room is well ventilated if you’re using chemical products (like oven cleaners) inside
* Use garden sprays only on calm days so they don’t blow back on your skin.

**Protect your environment**

* Avoid washing chemicals or pouring compounds directly down drains
* Wash your car on the lawn, or take it to the carwash
* Wipe paint brushes clean and rinse them over grass, away from areas used by children and pets
* Consider alternative methods, or non-toxic sprays for your garden or cleaning.

**EPA – what we do**

The EPA sets the rules for the use of hazardous substances by assessing the environmental and economic risks and benefits to New Zealanders and the environment.

For more information on staying safe visit: [www.epa.govt.nz/saferhomes](http://www.epa.govt.nz/saferhomes)

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