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Ways to keep your house clean while going green

If you're starting to wonder whether the products that you use to keep your house clean and your family healthy are actually doing the opposite, you're not alone.

Many people are questioning whether household cleaners and harsh soaps and might be doing them and the world around them more harm than good, and it's spurring a green clean movement that focuses on products that make less of a impact on the environment while still cleaning us and our homes.

Mari Weston, a sustainability consultant with the Madison Environmental Group, a consultant company, speaks about what everybody can do to make cleaning house, well, cleaner. Weston, a native of Sweden, has a master of science degree in chemical engineering, and the Swedish equivalent of a doctorate in energy efficiency and sustainability.

Madison Environmental Group is a for-profit consultancy company that works with businesses to reduce their environmental impact, but it also runs a community-based program that offers tips and guidelines for people to do the same thing on a personal level. It's called EnAct: Steps to Greener Living.

Question: Do you think there is a growing interest using environmentally friendly house cleaning processes and products?

Answer: I do think the interest in green cleaning is increasing, partly as a result of an increasing awareness of environmental issues in general, but also due to an improved understanding of that chemicals that we use in our home have an influence on our bodies and our health.

Q: What does it mean, from your perspective, to employ greener cleaning procedures when it comes to house cleaning?

A: For me it means using products that, compared to conventional cleaning products, have a lower negative impact on my family's health and on the environment around us, by having ingredients that occur naturally and are non-toxic. In addition, greener cleaning procedures can mean to use reusable, washable wipes, which saves resources, and to sweep the floor instead of vacuuming, which saves electricity. (It also means to not clean with strong products in excess. For example, if you are just wiping off breadcrumbs from the counter, you need to use only water. Even when you do need a cleaning product, it is seldom that you actually need bleach or a special anti-bacterial product.)

Q: If there was one thing you, as an environmental advocate, would ask someone to change in their homes, what would it be?

A: I would recommend switching to green personal care products as these so directly are absorbed into our bodies and have a strong impact on our health. There is also more and more proof that the ingredients in the conventional products have a negative effect on our environment. In reference to cleaning I would say to stop using bleach and anti-bacterial products except for very special needs.

Q: Do you believe there are health impacts on using greener cleaning strategies?

A: There is no requirement of an "ingredient list" for cleaning products, which means you really have no idea what goes into most cleaning products. If you use products that come from your pantry, you know exactly what is going to be in your house. Many chemicals commonly used in cleaning products is known either to be toxic or it is not fully understood what effects they have on the body. There are many research studies showing that conventional cleaning products can have a negative effect of your health. For example, the American Thoracic Society have presented that regular spray cleaners may cause asthma.

Q: Is there an online site or other references that you can recommend for people who want to employ greener strategies in their everyday lives?

A: To start with I have to recommend our own resource, EnAct: Steps to Greener Living, which is a free community program, www.enactwi.org. For making your own cleaning products, there is a document there "How to Create a Non-Toxic Cleaning Kit" found under "General Resources." I would also recommend the Environmental Working Group and its website www.EWG.org. It is a very helpful site, it has best and worst lists for many daily use products, and much to read about health effects with many references to scientific studies.