Agricultural Extension Service ● University of Minnesota

FACT SHEET

CONSUMER INFORMATION

HOME ECONOMICS—FAMILY LIVING NO. 20—1970

MARY FRANCES LAMISON

Cleaning Products

To shop more intelligently for cleaning supplies, we must know what ingredients the products contain. With so many companies making cleaning products, how do you know which product to buy? In choosing products, consider performance and safety. The most common ingredients are alkalis, acids, detergents, abrasives, bleaches, sanitizers, and spirit solvents.

Alkalis

Alkalis help make products clean. The best known of them would be ammonia and baking soda.

Alkalis are very effective in removing dirt without rubbing. They work well for removing grease because they form an emulsion, which means it holds the oily part in suspension. When held in suspension, these oily parts will not deposit themselves again.

Alkaline substances differ in strength and one should understand this before trying to use them. Baking soda is the most mild of the alkalis used. If diluted, washing soda can also be used for removing stains from china and plastic dishes. Also it can be used on glass, wall tile, and procelain enamel.

Household ammonia is a dilute mixture of 5/10 percent ammonia gas in water. It is good for cleaning ovens, mirrors, and windows. Remember if the ammonia is sudsy, it contains detergent.

Listed in order of strength:

Very Mild	Moderate	Very Strong
baking soda	ammonia borax TSP	lye washing soda

Alkalis, especially the stronger ones, can be very harmful to a person. They can cause burns and if swallowed could cause internal injuries or death. The Federal Hazardous Substances Act forces companies to specify words of caution on containers of dangerous products. The label must also state precautions to be followed or avoided for the safe use of the product. Examine label and follow its instructions carefully.

Alkalis will remove oil from your hands so be sure to wear gloves when working. Also, do not use strong alkalis on an oil base paint as it will cause the paint to peel. Alkalis also have a tendency to turn aluminum dark.

If using alkalis, be sure to rinse thoroughly with water.

When shopping for products containing alkalis, look for the common name in the list above.

For alkalis, that are toxic, the words "Warning" or "Caution" are signal words to look for on the can or bottle. Those alkalis that are highly toxic will have the words "Danger" or "Poison."

Acids

Acids vary in strength. The consumer needs to be alert to the function the cleaner performs.

Very Mild	Moderate	Very Strong
vinegar lemon juice	hydrochloric	oxalic sulfuric sodium acid sulphate

Two dry substances that homemakers use often are cream of tartar for sweetening coffeemakers and brightening aluminum pans and sodium acid sulphate, the main ingredient in many toilet bowl cleaners.

Acids are often very effective in removing hard water deposits, discoloration of aluminum, brass, and copper. Stronger acids will remove rust stains without a lot of rubbing.

Since acids are toxic, the consumer is again protected by the Federal Hazardous Substances Act. The containers must be marked "Caution" or "Warning." For those that are highly toxic, the signal words would be "Poison" or "Danger."

Detergents—are alkalis

Many home cleaning products contain detergents. If suds appear, you know that some detergent has been included.

Detergents help to loosen dirt. If soluble phosphates have been added they are called builders and these have even greater ability to remove oily dirt. If a builder has been added to a detergent, it is called "Heavy Duty" or "All-Purpose."

Abrasives

Abrasives are materials that wear off dirt by rubbing. Rottenstone and silica are two examples. Sandpaper, plastic and nylon mesh, and steel wool are abrasives.

Abrasive materials are also used in scouring powders and pads. In general, the larger the particles the harsher the cleaner. Plastic or nylon mesh is the finest abrasive. The finer the abrasive, the less damage to surface underneath.

The consumer can tell abrasives by feeling them. Also labels sometimes use the term "abrasive," but usually states they are cleaners. Abrasives scour off tarnish, burned on food particles, and grease. Abrasives, if used continuously, can scratch the surface and once a surface is scratched it gets dirty faster and is harder to clean.

Very coarse abrasives can cause damage to plastic ware, glass and nonstick finishes. Also, painted woodwork can be damaged by use of coarse abrasives.

Sharon Gilsrud is Blue Earth County extension home economist and Mary Frances Lamison is extension specialist in home management at the University of Minnesota.

Bleaches

The most commonly used household cleaning bleach usually is the chlorine type. Sodium hypochlorite is its active ingredient.

Bleaches are used to remove stain, but practice caution and follow directions on the label. Bleach will darken aluminum like alkalis.

Caution: Bleaches should never be used with toilet bowl cleaners or rust removers because they react to form a harmful gas.

Look for the words sodium hypochlorite among the list of ingredients. Also the manufacturers of chlorine bleaches are proud of their product and will list it as bleach or bleaches as it cleans.

Sanitizers

Sanitizers are products that reduce the number of bacteria to a safe level. Common sanitizers are liquid chlorine bleaches and chlorophenol products.

Sanitizers are often used in cleaning bathrooms and washing dishes by hand in a large place. The main caution is to follow the directions on the bottle.

Sanitizers help keep areas sanitary. The chemicals help deodorize surfaces because they kill the micro-organisms creating the odor.

Check the labels for any precautions.

Spirit Solvents

Most polishes and waxes for wood furniture and floors contain a spirit solvent. Spirit solvents are similar to fluids used in drycleaning because they remove oily dirt. In wood care products, spirit solvents are necessary because water is harmful.

If the solvent is flammable, it must say so on the can.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POLISHING AND SELF-POLISHING WAXES

SELF-POLISHING WAX

For floors only
Not on any other surfaces such as furniture, woodwork, appliances.

Dries shiny
Solids are microscopically small particles which settle into level, smooth film reflecting light and providing shine.

Does not contain naphtha
Water is the carrier instead of naphtha. Naphtha would soften tiny particles, and wax would not dry shiny.

Do not shake up
Does not require shaking; bubbles caused by shaking would spoil smooth film.

Apply to clean surface
Self-polishing wax has no cleaning properties. Do not apply with cleaning or scrubbing motion.

Do not rub in
This will spoil the shine. Spread with light, even strokes—the fewer the better.

Let dry without disturbing
This means 20-30 minutes.

Remove old wax
Thorough scrubbing before new application removes old wax.

POLISHING WAX

Many uses
All waxable surfaces, including floors when so recommended.

Does not dry shiny
Requires rubbing or wiping. This action distributes and arranges particles of wax evenly so they reflect light and provide shine.

Contains naphtha
Originally to keep wax soft so it could spread. Now the cleaning properties of naphtha in liquid products are also recognized.

Shake before using (except paste)
Shaking mixes waxes and cleaning ingredients—especially important if wax has been exposed to extreme cold.

No precleaning necessary
Naphtha and other ingredients are the cleaning agents. On extremely dirty surfaces, liquid cleaning wax is preferable to paste wax.

Rub in to clean
Rubbing loosens the dirt, which is picked up by the application cloth.

Follow specific directions
Depending on product used. Give examples by reading instructions on labels.

Apply over old wax
All waxes in this polishing group can be applied over old wax if used correctly.

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