



Q: Why should I care about what is on a product label?

A: The label will tell you about (1) **what type of cleaning the product can provide** and (2) **potentially hazardous ingredients**. These are key points for safe cleaning.

Q: How do I know what a product is meant for?

A: The label will tell you **if the product is designed to clean and/or to disinfect**. Although these terms are often used together, they are actually quite different.

- **Cleaning** means removing built-up contamination such as soil or dirt. Cleaning is accomplished by the product chemistry (the soap and other ingredients) and the action of wiping or scrubbing the surface. This gives a surface that appears and feels dirt-free.
- **Disinfecting** means reducing the level of microorganisms on a surface, such as bacteria and viruses. Unlike cleaning where you can see or feel if the dirt is gone, disinfection is not visible. Therefore, the label gives very specific instructions for applying the product to achieve disinfection.

Q: Should I always select a disinfecting cleaner since it both cleans and reduces microorganisms?

A: Not necessarily. Disinfecting products have a particular intended use that comes with some trade-offs.

- Clients who are at greater risk for infection due to their health (for example, if a client has a compromised immune system, C. Diff or MRSA, or special medical needs) or clients recently discharged from the hospital may benefit from use of a disinfecting product in certain areas of their home such as the kitchen and bathroom.
- However, because of their active chemical ingredients, disinfecting cleaners may cause you and your client to be exposed to strong chemicals that can be irritating or even cause breathing difficulty.

Q: Does a cleaner from the grocery store really contain hazardous ingredients? How can I tell?

A: Most products for home use are complex and carefully designed mixtures of many ingredients. Some commonly used ingredients may cause health problems including:

- Irritation of the respiratory tract (breathing passages through which air goes in and out of your body)
- Eye irritation
- Skin irritation

The easiest way to tell is to **look for a warnings or hazard statements** on the product label. For example:

- **WARNING:** Causes substantial but temporary eye injury...Prolonged or frequently repeated skin contact may cause allergic reactions in some people...Vapors may irritate....
- **PRECAUTIONARY STATEMENTS.** Hazardous to Humans and Domestic Animals

This section of the **label may list practices for safe use** such as wearing safety glasses and ventilating the room (fan or open window). **First aid information** may also be included. The warnings are very important to read carefully in order to **protect yourself, your client and other members of their household!**

Your own nose, eyes, and breathing also provide important information about potentially hazardous ingredients. If you experience irritation or another reaction, that's a warning from your body to use this product cautiously.

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Q: What other important information is on the label?

A: Several other sections of the label are worth noting:

Ingredients

- **Why?** This section of the label may help you avoid exposing yourself or your client to a chemical that you or your client have sensitivity to. For example, “bleach” containing disinfecting products will list “sodium hypochlorite” as the “active ingredient”. This chemical is the source of the familiar odor, the skin, eye and inhalation hazard and the disinfecting ability.
- **Active ingredients:** the chemical components that result in the claimed performance of the product (“disinfection”). Also shown is percentage (%) of the liquid volume contributed by each ingredient.
- **Other ingredients:** everything else in the mixture. This might include water, fragrances, and colorants, for example.
- **Note:** A more comprehensive listing of cleaning and disinfecting product ingredients and potential health hazards can be found on the product Safety Data Sheet (SDS) that is prepared by and available from the manufacturer. An SDS is available for many but not all cleaning and disinfecting products.

Directions for Use

- Manufacturers often recommend cleaning before disinfection because the presence of surface soil can reduce the effectiveness of the disinfecting ingredient. Always read and follow the product instructions for best results in your client’s home!
- Don’t ever mix bleach and ammonia. Toxic vapors are produced when these two products are mixed.

Storage and Disposal

- Cleaning products may contain strong chemicals with hazardous properties. They need to be stored away from children or other people who may not understand the hazards. Some strong chemical ingredients can react with other chemicals.
- Disposal of C&D products and containers may also involve specific instructions provided by the manufacturer.

Manufacturer Contact Information

- Contact information on the product label allows you to obtain more information about the product. This typically includes an address, telephone number, and website.
- The contact information can also be used to get answers to your questions about product use and safety, as well as to report any problems you experienced or feedback you would like to give.

***For more information on cleaning-related topics in home health care, see our fact sheets at:
www.uml.edu/SafeHCFactSheets***

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