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Pia Markkanen, Catherine Galligan, Margaret Quinn
Safe Home Care Project, Lowell Center for Sustainable Production,
University of Massachusetts Lowell

Cleaning for home care clients with asthma and allergies

Introduction

The Safe Home Care Project at the University of Massachusetts Lowell works to improve safety and health of home care workers as they carry out their care duties in clients' and family members' homes. Our project is funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a U.S. government agency. One of the project's goals is to promote ways to make home care safer for both the person doing the work and the person receiving care.

Our team recently developed a training program on cleaning for home care clients with asthma and allergies. This was done in partnership with the Massachusetts Council for Home Care Aides and their Personal and Home Care Aide State Training (PHCAST) pilot program. The program highlighted three main topics:

- (1) What is asthma? Symptoms, common triggers, and what happens in the lungs during an asthma attack.
- (2) How does cleaning relate to asthma? The importance of cleaning and how cleaning products might aggravate asthma or asthma-like conditions.
- (3) What cleaning tools and practices can minimize asthma? Suitable cleaning products, tools, and practical cleaning tips.

Understanding these points is useful for protecting people with asthma or health conditions similar to asthma, such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). Here is a brief summary of key points to remember when you are house cleaning.

Check the Caution label of a cleaning product

Cleaning is often used as a catch-all word meaning both cleaning and disinfecting. Cleaning products remove surface contaminants like soil particles and grease. Disinfecting products are meant to destroy germs in the home. But note: to be effective, it's important to clean away the

dirt or grease before disinfecting. Both cleaning products and disinfectants are often a mixture of many chemical ingredients. Harsh ingredients that can irritate our breathing might include:

- * ammonia in glass, window, bath, oven, toilet cleaners, and wax removers.
- * chlorine bleach in disinfectants, as well as dishwasher and laundry detergents.
- * quaternary ammonium compounds (quats) in floor cleaners, shower cleaners, mold removers, and non-alcohol hand sanitizers.
- * sodium hydroxide (lye, caustic soda) in oven and drain cleaners.
- * alcohol in shower cleaners.

Whichever cleaning product you use, pay attention to its “Caution” statement about irritant properties, either to the eyes, skin, or breathing. Even if the main concern is asthma and lung irritation, it is important to be aware that common cleaners may irritate or harm skin, eyes, or other body organs.

Importance of using fragrance-free products

Use fragrance-free products when someone suffers from asthma or allergies because the fragrance itself can irritate the breathing passages or cause an asthma attack. Even if a home care client does not have asthma, it's good to avoid using or wearing fragrances like perfumes or after-shave. Don't assume that fragrance use is acceptable and never spray scents in the client's home without asking.

Suitable cleaning products, tools, and practices for asthmatics

The best way to protect against asthma, breathing irritation, skin irritation, or other health reactions is to totally avoid materials that irritate or cause asthma attacks. However, this is not always possible. There are no perfectly safe products or practices – every choice has some tradeoff. The key point is to think about the cleaning products or practices you use. For asthma in particular, select the best overall approach and then take steps to protect yourself and your client by carefully minimizing hazards. For example: minimize breathing in harsh cleaning products:

- Look for basic cleaning products that have minimal or no “cautions” on their labels.
- Use fragrance free products.
- Apply products with a cloth instead of spraying them onto a surface.
- Keep the room ventilated during cleaning by opening a window or turning on a kitchen or bathroom fan.

What about green cleaning?

“Green” is a popular term used to describe something that is safe for human health and the environment. However, there is no single industry-wide definition for “green” and some “green” products may still cause health reactions. Also, “natural” does not always mean healthy—naturally occurring oils or ingredients may still be harmful. Many green cleaning products are effective and less hazardous than conventional cleaners, but not all green cleaning products have been tested. When choosing a green cleaning product, it is good to look on the label to see if the product is certified by an independent organization like Green Seal or the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Design for the Environment.

Making a green cleaning product yourself

Do-it-yourself (DIY) basic household cleaners can be made easily and inexpensively. For example, plain baking soda can be used for scrubbing toilets, sinks and bathtubs. Vinegar and water can be used for floor cleaning. There are a plenty of DIY household cleaning recipes available (resource list at the end). Making your own products is one way to be sure of what ingredients are used and to save money in the process. The Massachusetts Toxics Use Reduction Institute offers DIY green cleaning recipes at:

http://www.turi.org/Our_Work/Green_Cleaning_Lab/Does_It_Clean/Do-it-Yourself_Recipes

Conclusion

We have highlighted some key points about cleaning for clients with asthma and allergies. Cleaning is essential to our health but it is not always healthy. Intensive cleaning is often recommended but little attention is given to human health hazards related to the cleaning products or how they are used. Too often, “clean” is associated with the smell of strong cleaning products . . . when the smell of clean is actually no smell at all.

A useful resource

The American Cleaning Institute’s *Cleaning to Control Allergies & Asthma* is a useful booklet available on the Internet in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese at

http://www.cleaninginstitute.org/clean_living/allergies__asthma_publications.aspx

This booklet offers cleaning tips for each room (bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, living room), linen washing tips to control dust mites, vacuuming tips, clutter control tips, appropriate cleaning techniques like cleaning in a well-ventilated area and avoiding spraying of products, and other useful advice.