



# 5-minute safety talk

## Household Chemical Dangers

Household chemicals serve important functions in our daily lives. In fact, it's hard to imagine life without them. However, when household chemicals are used improperly they can be hazardous. Learning how to properly use, store, and dispose of these products can help you avoid unnecessary injury and illness and protect the environment.

### Purchase and Use

Although children are at risk for accidents related to household chemicals, they are not the only group. Many adults suffer unintentional injury, poison, or death when they do not follow label instructions or attempt to mix different substances.

It's important to make informed decisions about the type of household chemicals you bring into your home. Before you buy, read the packaging to make sure you know exactly what you're purchasing. The following are a few common terms and definitions found on labels:

- **Caution:** Indicates the lowest level of potential harm. It means that the product is not likely to produce permanent damage as a result of exposure, if appropriate first aid is given.
- **Warning:** Indicates a higher level of potential harm than Caution, meaning that you could become seriously ill or harmed. It is also used to identify products that can easily catch on fire. These products are required by law to be placed in child-resistant packaging.
- **Danger:** Indicates the highest level of potential harm. Accidental exposure to the eye or skin could produce tissue damage, and swallowing the product could produce damage to the mouth, throat, and stomach, or even death. Danger is also used if the material could explode if exposed to an open flame. These products are required by law to be placed in child-resistant packaging. You may also find a skull-and-crossbones symbol along with words "Danger-Poison" on certain pesticide products, which means the product is a systemic poison.

- **Toxic or Poison:** Can cause injury or death if swallowed, inhaled, ingested, or absorbed through the skin. Effects can be immediate (acute) or delayed (chronic).
- **Flammable:** Easily catches fire and tends to burn rapidly. Avoid ignition sources, even remote ones, as vapors may travel or concentrate.
- **Corrosive:** The chemical or its vapor can cause severe burns on contact.
- **Irritant:** Causes soreness or inflammation of the skin, eyes, mucous membranes, or respiratory system.
- **Reactive:** Contains unstable compounds that may react with air, water, or other chemicals. Reactive chemicals should not be mixed unless directed, and even then, with caution.

Other tips to consider: buy only the amount you need; select the least toxic items available; and use multi-purpose products whenever possible. These measures help control the need for storage or disposal of excess material. As an extra safety measure, select products with child-resistant packaging.

When using household solvents, proper protective equipment is a must. Also, make sure the area that you are working in is properly ventilated, and never smoke while using solvents, glues and flammable mastics.

Other types of household chemicals can pose dangers, especially to children. These include mouthwash, nail polish remover, perfumes and other personal hygiene products, as well as mothballs, automotive fluids, etc.

### Storage

Always keep household chemicals in their original containers, locked and secured, away from children and separate from food and other household substances. Also, avoid exposure to extreme heat or cold, as many household products can be affected by temperature.

### Disposal

Periodically clean out storage cabinets and safely dispose of outdated and unneeded household chemicals. Carefully follow the disposal instructions indicated on the label. Never pour hazardous wastes into storm drains, onto the ground, into any body of water, or down the drain as it may result in health or environmental problems. Also, check with your municipality to see if they offer a chemical disposal, recycling or reuse program.

### In the Event of an Emergency

If you suspect poisoning from a household chemical has occurred, contact a medical professional such as your doctor, the Emergency Room or call paramedics and the Poison Control Center right away, (800) 222-1222.

For other types of household chemical emergencies, keep phone numbers for Police and Fire departments near the phone.

Visit [nsc.org/members](http://nsc.org/members) for more safety tips

