

How to Identify Hazardous Products—Read the Label



These days it seems like every product comes with a warning, so you may not pay much attention to the words on the label. However, when it comes to hazardous products, *reading the label is the easiest way to identify one.*

Signal words

First look for these signal words: **Caution, Warning, Danger or Poison.** Federal law requires labeling of hazardous products by using these signal words. These words don't all mean the same thing. By understanding the difference in the use of the signal words, you can determine how hazardous the product is.

A product labeled **“Caution”** means *a mild to moderate hazard.* It is not fatal if swallowed, but the product may irritate the skin or make a person sick. **“Warning”** means *a moderate hazard.* A product labeled **“Danger”** is more toxic. Danger means the product is extremely flammable, corrosive or highly toxic. **Poison** means *the product is highly toxic,* meaning it is harmful or potentially fatal if swallowed.

Once you understand the difference in meaning of the signal words, you can use this information when purchasing products. For example, if you are comparing two bathroom cleaners and one product is labeled with Caution, and another is labeled with Danger, you know the product labeled Caution is less hazardous.

Other terms to look for that indicate the product may be less hazardous include:

- Chlorine-free (example: bleach)
- Water-based (example: glues, adhesives, paints)
- Plant-based (example: solvents and strippers)

Be aware that some terms on the label may be misleading, such as “natural” or “environmentally-friendly.” There are no regulations defining how these terms may be used.

Characteristic words

Characteristic words indicate the type of hazard posed by a product and are usually found after the signal word on the label. The following terms are characteristic words:

- **Flammable/Combustible:** The product can easily catch fire and support a flame.
- **Corrosive:** “Corrosive,” “acid,” “caustic,” “lye,” “alkaline,” or “causes burns to the skin” mean that the product can burn the skin or eyes. It can also eat away other materials with which it comes into contact.

Characteristic Words, continued on other side

Become A Label Reader

Look for key words on labels and choose the least hazardous product.

Less toxic	Caution	Mild/moderate
↓	Warning	Moderate hazard
↓	Danger	Extremely flammable, corrosive or highly toxic
↓	Poison	Highly toxic – harmful or fatal if swallowed
More toxic		

Remove this card and carry it with you. It will make label reading easier and help you purchase the least hazardous products.

- **Toxic:** “Poison” or “harmful if swallowed” mean that the product is poisonous and can be harmful or fatal if swallowed, inhaled, or absorbed through the skin.
- **Reactive:** “Do not mix with....” or “store separately from other products” means the product may react violently or produce toxic gas if combined with other substances (examples: certain types of drain cleaners, oven cleaners or other products containing bleach, ammonia or lye).

Exposure pathways

Household hazardous products can be harmful not only to the environment but also to humans and animals. The ways that chemicals enter the body are called “exposure pathways.” The four exposure pathways are:

- 1. Contact:** Many chemicals can cause harm by getting on your skin, in your eyes or in your nose or throat. They can irritate or burn exposed areas. Labels may say “avoid skin contact,” “wear rubber gloves” or “wash hands after use” to warn people about possible injuries.
- 2. Absorption:** Absorption occurs when a substance enters your body through the pores in your skin.
- 3. Ingestion:** When you eat or drink something, you ingest it. From the stomach or intestines, poisons enter the bloodstream and are carried throughout the body where some remain for a long time.
- 4. Inhalation:** You can breathe in harmful vapors or fumes when liquids evaporate as well as from the mist of aerosol sprays. From the nose or mouth, the vapors go into the lungs and then into the bloodstream. Labels may say “use only with adequate ventilation.”

Product storage

Storing a product properly can help extend its life and prevent accidents.

- Keep products out of reach of children and animals.
- Store all hazardous products on high shelves or in locked cabinets away from food.
- Make sure the lids and caps are tightly sealed and childproofed.
- Store corrosive, flammable, reactive and poisonous products on separate shelves and where they will stay dry.
- Store products that say “prevent freezing” (such as latex paint) indoors.
- Never mix chemicals together (such as bleach and ammonia).
- Keep products away from heat, sparks, flames or other sources of ignition.
- Don’t buy more than you need.
- Keep products in their original containers, and make sure the label is legible.
- For long-term storage, place waterproof transparent tape over product labels to prevent them from falling off.

Proper disposal of household hazardous waste

Improper disposal of household hazardous waste, such as throwing it in the garbage or pouring it down the drain, could harm your family or garbage hauler. Improper disposal may also contaminate the air, water and soil.

Hennepin County offers two drop-off facilities for residents to properly dispose of household hazardous wastes for no charge. These facilities, in Brooklyn Park and Bloomington, are open year-round. For more information, visit hennepin.us/dropoffs or call 612-348-3777.

Web resources

- www.hennepin.us/environment – Hennepin County. Information for residents on year-round drop-off facilities for household hazardous wastes, seasonal collection events and how to reduce the amount and toxicity of household hazardous waste in your home.
- www.epa.gov/children – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Children’s Health Protection. Information on environmental risks to children’s health and tips to protect children from environmental risks.
- www.checnet.org/healthhouse/home/home.asp – Children’s Health Environmental Coalition. Information on environmental health risks to children and alternatives to conventional dry cleaning.
- householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov – Household Products Database of the National Institutes of Health. Information about the ingredients in common household products, their potential health effects, and safety and handling.
- www.mnpoison.org – Minnesota Poison Control System. Information about common household products and poison prevention.
- www.reduce.org – Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Tips to reduce the amount and toxicity of waste when you shop, **work and play**.
- RethinkRecycling.com – Solid Waste Management Coordinating Board, comprised of the six member counties, and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Residents and businesses can learn how to create less waste, recycle more and properly dispose of hazardous items.



Hennepin County
Environmental Services
612-348-3777

hennepin.us search: household hazardous waste

Attention.....If you want help translating this information, call 612-348-3777
 Atención.....Si desea recibir asistencia gratuita para traducir esta información, llame 612-348-3777
 Ogow.....Haddii aad dooneyso in lagaa kaalmeeoyo tarjamadda macluumaadkani oo laceg la’ aan wac 612-348-3777
 Ceeb toom.....Yog koj xav tau kev pab txhais cov xov no rau koj dawb, hu 612-348-3777

TDD/TTY 612-596-6985



Your go-to guide for waste & recycling
in the Twin Cities.