



Only Rain Down the Drain

A Homeowner's Guide to Keeping our Waterbodies and Drinking Water Pollutant-Free

Disposing of Household Toxics

Described below are kinds of household toxics that should not be disposed of "down the drain." Your drain leads either to a home septic system or a municipal treatment plant, neither of which is designed to completely remove toxic chemicals from wastewater. At least some of the toxics pass through the treatment process and up in a stream, river or groundwater.

Also, the products described below should also never be poured on the ground or into gutters where they will eventually enter storm sewers, which generally lead directly to a nearby stream.

Household Cleaners

Many of the products used at home, such as soaps and detergents, are meant to be washed down the drain. These products are biodegradable and, if the wastewater from your home is properly treated, they pose no problem to the environment.

However, there are products commonly found on kitchen shelves that are toxic to people and to the environment. Oven cleaners, floor wax, furniture polish, drain cleaners, and spot removers are examples. Check the labels of products such as these for the following toxic components: lye, phenols, petroleum distillates and trichlorobenzene.

Products containing these chemicals pose a potential threat to health, if improperly used, and also present real environmental hazards when it comes to disposal.

It is often possible to use alternative, less toxic methods to clean or to polish. Ovens, for example, can be cleaned by applying table salt to spills, then scrubbing with a solution of washing soda and water. A combination of lemon oil and linseed oil makes a good furniture polish. Clogged drains can sometimes be cleaned with a metal "snake" instead of toxic chemical cleaners.



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When you feel that it is absolutely necessary to use a product containing toxic chemicals, some cautions should be observed. As with pesticides, the rule of thumb is to read the label and to use the product only as directed. Some products become even more dangerous when mixed with others: for example, chlorine bleach mixed with ammonia can produce deadly chloramine gas. Protective clothing and rubber gloves may be necessary; good ventilation is a must.

Detergents

One of the most-used home cleaning products is detergent. Many of the detergent products formulated for automatic washing machines and dishwashers contain phosphorus, which has been shown to cause water quality problems in lakes and estuaries. The detergent industry has responded to this problem by developing products that contain little or no phosphate. For example, all liquid detergents are phosphorus-free, as are some powders. Again, the label will clearly tell you the phosphorous content. The range is from about 13 percent, in some automatic dishwashing detergents, to none. When you have a choice, buy the phosphorus-free or low phosphorus product.

Home Maintenance Products

Among the most toxic household products are those used for home repair and maintenance. Paints, preservatives, strippers, brush cleaners and solvents contain a wide range of chemicals, some of which are suspected carcinogens (cancer-causing). These products should never be put into sewer or septic systems – in other words, not down the drain.

To reduce disposal problems, buy only what you need. Used turpentine or brush cleaner can be filtered and reused. Paint cans and other containers should be stuffed with newspaper and allowed to dry before placing in the trash.

Hobby supplies such as photographic chemicals are also hazardous and should not go down the drain.

Car Care

Motor oil, battery acid, gasoline, car wax, engine cleaners, antifreeze, degreasers, radiator flushes and rust preventives are examples of automotive products containing toxic chemicals. Some car owners do their own maintenance work such as changing their car's oil, and many of these people pour the used oil down the storm drain. One quart of oil can contaminate up to two million gallons of drinking water. The oil from one engine – four to six quarts- can produce an eight-acre oil slick.

The only recommended way to dispose of used oil is to put it in into a sturdy container, like a plastic milk jug, and take it to your neighborhood garage or oil recycling center.

Disposing of antifreeze is also a problem. Antifreeze contains thylene glycol, which is poisonous to people, fish and wildlife. Many cats and dogs have died after drinking sweet tasting puddles of antifreeze they find on driveways in the winter.



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Instead of pouring antifreeze down the drain or washing it into storm drains, ask your local service station to add the liquid to their used antifreeze storage drum. You can also dilute the antifreeze and pour the mixture into a gravel pit or any area with good drainage. This method takes advantage of the soil's natural filtering capacity.

WHAT YOU CAN DO!

Here are some general rules of thumb for handling and disposing of household chemicals:

- Read the label – know what you are buying and what the potential hazards are.
- Store products in their original containers so the label can be referred to whenever the product is used.
- Use alternative, less harmful products whenever possible (for example, boric acid is very effective in controlling roaches).
- Use the least toxic product you can find and never buy more than you need.
- Dispose of your unwanted household chemicals through proper disposal methods. Pour liquids such as cleaning fluids into a plastic container that is filled with kitty litter or stuffed with newspaper. Allow it to dry outdoors before disposing.
- Take used motor oil and antifreeze to a gas station with an oil recycling program.
- Insist on effective sewage treatment for your community.



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You can also dispose of household chemicals on any one of the Westchester County chemical clean-up days listed here.

Westchester County's **2004 Household Chemical Clean-Up Day Schedule**

Friday, May 7 (1 to 3pm) & Saturday, May 8 (9am to 3pm)
at FDR State Park, Yorktown

Friday, June 11 (1 to 3 pm) & Saturday, June 12 (9am-3 pm)
at Westchester Community College, Valhalla

Saturday, September 18 (9 am to 3 pm)
at the County Recycling Center, Yonkers

Friday, November 5 (1 to 3pm) & Saturday, November 6 (9am to 3pm)
at Playland Park, Rye

Guidelines for disposing of chemical items: All chemicals must be in original or labeled containers. Close bags and bottles tightly. Place all chemicals in a sturdy box and in the trunk of your car. Residential chemicals only.

Items accepted (free of charge)

Properly labeled household chemicals, including:
Most automotive fluids (i.e., antifreeze, brake fluid, gasoline)
Fire starter fluid (i.e., kerosene, butane, charcoal fluid, turpentine)
Metal, jewelry and furniture polishes and waxes; wood preservatives
Pesticides, insecticides, herbicides
Photographic and swimming pool chemicals
Car tires (maximum 10)
Fluorescent light bulbs
Fire extinguishers; 1 & 2 pound propane tanks
Rechargeable and button cell batteries
Mercury including items such as thermometers and thermostats
Computer monitors and TVs only

Items not accepted

Paint—oil and latex—dispose of with household trash in solid form. Air dry and use kitty litter or waste paint hardener.
Motor oil—take to service station or motor oil retail outlet
Vehicle batteries—take to local scrap metal dealer or any vehicle battery retail outlet
Non-rechargeable batteries—dispose of in trash
BBQ/Propane tanks 20lbs. & other compressed gas cylinders (helium and oxygen tanks)
Freon and appliances containing freon (i.e. air conditioners, refrigerators, dehumidifiers)
Pharmaceutical/medical/biological waste
Smoke and fire detectors
Materials from commercial and institutional use

Any questions? Call the County's Household Chemical Info Line at (914) 813-5425