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Here's a list of basic ingredients, along with their common cleaning uses.

Baking soda. This mild alkaline powder can be used for a variety of household cleaning purposes, such as absorbing odors, cleaning the inside of refrigerators, loosening baked-on food from pans, and removing stains from tile, glass, oven doors and china. It also acts as a stain remover for fruit juices and other mild acids.

Borax*. A powder or crystalline salt sold in most grocery stores, borax is a water softener, disinfectant and general deodorizer. (It makes an excellent freshener when added to laundry.)

Castile soap. A mild soap available in liquid or bar form that can be used for general-purpose cleaning. It was once made only from olive oil, but now may include other vegetable oils as well. Castile soap is free of petroleum-based ingredients.

Cream of tartar. This common baking ingredient is a mild acid that can be used as a sink and bathtub stain remover. It also can be used to remove spots from aluminum cookware.

Hydrogen peroxide. A mild alternative to chlorine bleach, its oxidizing abilities make it useful in stain removal, mild bleaching and sterilizing.

Lemon juice. This familiar acidic ingredient can be used to lighten stains and cut grease. It also can be used to remove tarnish on brass, copper, bronze and aluminum (but not silver).

Washing soda. A stronger alternative to baking soda, washing soda can be used as a water softener in conjunction with laundry detergents (gloves are recommended as it may irritate skin; do not use with silks, woolens or vinyl). It's also good at tackling oil and grease.

White vinegar. Good for a variety of household cleaning tasks, vinegar may be used to help kill germs and deodorize, remove some carpet stains, and clean coffee makers, chrome, cookware and countertops. Its acidic enough to clear minor drain clogs. Note that while white vinegar has an odor while wet, when dry, it does not. (Don't use it on acetate fabrics, found in some tablecloths, for example, because it can dissolve the fibers.)

** Heather's note: There has been recent concern over potential health effects of Borax.*

Avoid harmful ingredients. To minimize health and environmental risk, avoid these ingredients:

*** Nonylphenol ethoxylates (NPEs).** When they're released into the environment, these chemicals can break down into toxic substances that can act as hormone disrupters, potentially threatening the reproductive capacity of fish, birds and mammals. Found in many cleaning products, especially detergents, stain removers, citrus cleaners and disinfectants.

*** Antibacterials.** Some may cause skin and eye irritation, and certain types, such as triclosan, may cause environmental harm by contributing to the emergence of antibiotic resistant bacteria. What's more, research shows that antibacterial household cleaners won't keep you any safer from infectious illnesses than regular types. Found in a variety of household cleaners; many products that carry the "antibacterial" label are actually disinfectants, which are regulated by the EPA as pesticides and all have some health effects. (Hand, bath and dish soaps are not regulated by the EPA, but by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration instead. For more information on these, see "Why You Don't Need Antibacterial Soap," at www.MotherEarthNews.com.)

* Ammonia. It's poisonous when swallowed, extremely irritating to respiratory passages and can burn skin on contact. (Note: Never mix ammonia-containing products with chlorine bleach - it produces a poisonous gas.) Found in floor, bathroom, tile and glass cleaners.

* Chlorine bleach (sodium hypochlorite). Bleach is extremely irritating to the lungs and eyes. Sold by itself and found in a variety of household cleaners.

* Diethanolamine (DEA) and Triethanolamine (TEA). These can produce carcinogenic compounds, which may penetrate the skin when combined with nitrosamines (often-undisclosed preservatives). Found in detergents and sudsing cleaners.

* Hydrochloric acid. Found in toilet bowl cleaners, it can severely burn skin and irritate the eyes and respiratory tract.

* Ethylene glycol butyl ether (EGBE). EGBE can cause reproductive problems, such as reduced fertility and birth defects. This chemical also is known to irritate the eyes and nose, and cause headaches and vomiting. Found in some all-purpose cleaners and glass cleaners. Also called "2-butoxyethanol."

* Phosphates. These can reach waterways and contribute to the overgrowth of algae and aquatic weeds, which can kill off fish populations and other aquatic life. Found in automatic dishwasher detergents, dish soaps and some laundry detergents. (Consumer Reports has rated several dishwashing and laundry detergents, which claim to be phosphate-free, as "good" to "excellent" in overall performance. To compare, visit www.greenerchoices.org, click on "Home and Garden," then "Cleaners: Buying Guide" and "Green Ratings" to compare.)

* Sodium hydroxide (lye). Lye is corrosive and extremely irritating to eyes, nose and throat and can burn those tissues on contact. Found in some drain and oven cleaners.

