

10 Ways to Save the World and Your Health

By Shanna Thompson, LifeScript Staff Writer
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It's hip to be green, or so the Prius-driving, organic-eating, eco-chic in crowd say. But what if you aren't ready to build a sustainable home from the ground up or trade your Hummer in for a hybrid? Can you still have a hand in taking care of planet Earth, your home and family? The experts agree that anyone can live eco-friendly, and as it turns out, it doesn't take much time or money to tap into your inner green goddess. Learn how to identify the toxic culprits in your home and make your living environment healthier for you and the rest of the world. Plus, take our quiz to find out how much you know about living green...

One Saturday afternoon a few years back, before the green movement consisted of much more than recycling, I went on a cleaning spree. I scoured the tub with Comet, shined the bathroom floor with Mop 'N Glow, sprayed 409 on every surface, Windexed the mirror until it gleamed, and topped everything off with a splash of bleach for good measure. I repeated the process in the kitchen, then moved on to the living room where I sprinkled a white drift of carpet freshener across the floor before stirring it into a hazy cloud with the vacuum.

Tired but satisfied with my day's work, I headed off to bed, the smell of clean tingling my nostrils. It wasn't until after a few hours of uncharacteristic restless leg syndrome, insomnia and a racing heart that I realized it might not only be my countertops that were coated with enough chemicals to kill a horse.

Green for Life

"They have no idea," says green living expert Ron Beres about consumers' awareness regarding toxic substances in the home. As co-founders of GreenNest.com, he and his wife Lisa specialize in healthy, non-toxic and organic products for the home. (See related story: [How to Live a Toxin-Free Life](#))

The Beres and other experts including Debra Lynn Dadd, a consumer advocate for health and the environment and author of *Home Safe Home* (Tarcher, 1997), point out that living green isn't just about being environmentally aware. Green is also about promoting a healthy stage for everyday life.

“Over the years, I’ve learned not to think of health and the environment as two separate things,” Dadd says. “It’s a symbiotic relationship.” But we don’t always recognize the symptoms of a toxic environment – nasal congestion, insomnia, flu symptoms, behavioral problems, and even cancer, infertility and birth defects.

But as the green movement becomes more mainstream, awareness among the general public is growing, and people realize they have more control of their physical environments, their health and their impact on the world. “There’s been an awakening going on,” Ron Beres says. “There is a healthy option for everything. As a consumer, you have a choice.”

1. Natural Cleaners

Typical household cleaners might cut the grease and get the grime out, but chances are you’re also breathing in harsh chemicals including ammonia, bleach, petroleum distillates, and formaldehyde. Check out GreenNest.com and Dadd’s Web site at DLD123.com to get recommendations for natural cleaners free from petrochemical volatile organic compounds (VOCs), such as products by SafeChoice, Country Save, Naturally Yours and Green Nest. Also, stop by your local health food store; many stock chemical-free cleaners. (See related story: [18 Ways to Keep It Clean, Naturally](#))

You can also swap in these non-toxic versions of cleaning supplies:

- Window cleaner: one part distilled white or apple cider vinegar and one part water, mixed in a spray bottle. (Wiping the windows clean with recycled newspaper makes for a streak-free shine.)
- Laundry detergent: washing soda (sodium carbonate)
- Fabric softener: baking soda (sodium bicarbonate)
- Grease cutter and furniture polish: washing soda
- Silver polish: toothpaste, salt or baking soda
- Toilet cleaner: lemon juice
- Dusting: olive oil or washing soda
- Mold remover : borax

2. Pure Water

Install a water filter. Fifty percent of our daily chlorine intake comes from bathing, according to Lisa Beres. Not only is it absorbed through the skin, but as chlorine vaporizes in a hot environment we breathe it into our lungs, which can result in upper respiratory tract irritation. A quick, inexpensive and easy solution is to buy a shower filter or bath ball. Low cost at around \$30 each, shower filters can be found at most hardware stores and are easily installed without any tools.

Also, invest in a filter for your drinking water. By installing a filter on your faucet, you’ll be able to drink clear, clean water and stop contributing to the over-abundance of water bottles

in landfills. "It will take 500 plus years for a single bottle to biodegrade," Lisa Beres says. "A drinking water filter is a must."

3. Breathe Easy

Buy an air purifier. The Bereses put an air filter at the top of the list for anyone who wants to combat toxins in the home. "You are reducing mold, spores and also formaldehyde and other gases from chemicals in paint and carpeting," Ron Beres says. Now that's something to breathe easy about. Models range in price from \$100 to several hundred dollars and can be found at most home improvement stores and online.

4. Sleep Tight

Millions of Americans suffer from insomnia. Environmental health experts speculate that toxins in the bedroom, where we spend about one-third of our lives, might have something to do with the problem.

From your mattress to the alarm clock, here are healthy changes you can make tonight:

- **Organic sheets:** Polyester/cotton sheets and no-iron cotton sheets are coated with formaldehyde to reduce wrinkling, Dadd says. Alternatives include organic cotton sheets, which are free from pesticides, cotton flannel sheets or untreated cotton percale sheets. All are available at most major department stores and online.
- **Barrier cover:** An organic cotton barrier cover shields your mattress and pillow from exposure to bacteria, mold and dust mites and other allergens.
- **Organic mattress:** To truly combat exposure to toxins in the bedroom, organic beds offer a variety of mattresses sans a chemically-based fire retardant. But not to worry, Lisa Beres says, organic beds are made with organic wool that acts as a natural flame retardant and meets federal standards. Various models can be found online ranging from \$600 to several thousand dollars.
- **Move the clock:** Even in the "off" mode, electric alarm clocks and other appliances such as televisions and radios emit electromagnetic fields, which studies suggest are connected to cancer, DNA damage and Alzheimer's disease. At the very least, keep anything powered by electricity away from the head of your bed, or move these appliances out of the bedroom. Also, consider switching to a battery-powered alarm clock. For those looking for a more comprehensive approach, an automatic demand switch (which turns off electricity at the fuse box to a particular wiring circuit, such as the bedroom) can be installed to completely shut power off to the bedroom while sleeping.

5. Eat Organic

Most produce sold in supermarkets is sprayed heavily with pesticides. Eating organic will ensure your strawberries aren't laced with toxic chemicals. Plus, it tastes better. Buying

locally grown fruit and vegetables that are in season cuts back on emissions and pollution from transporting produce across the country. Organic produce can be found at your local farmer's market. Most major grocery stores even offer an organic selection, and it's not much more expensive. Remember to look for the USDA Organic seal.

6. A New Hue

Thinking of sprucing up the living room with a fresh coat of paint or remodeling the kitchen? Consider remodeling with materials that are better for you and the environment. Low- and zero-VOC (volatile organic compound) paint, such as SafeCoat and Green Planet Paints, emit fewer VOCs known to cause respiratory irritation, headaches, nausea, and liver and central nervous system damage.

Off-gassing (evaporating VOCs) also occurs with thousands of other products including lacquers, paint strippers, pesticides, building materials, glues, adhesives, and permanent markers. Alternatives, including bio-degradable hemp and wool carpets and natural finishes, can be found online.

7. Baby Safe

Many plastic baby bottles leach potentially harmful chemicals, especially when in contact with hot liquid, Lisa Beres says. Look for baby bottles made without bisphenol-A, with a chemical that has been linked to developmental, neural and reproductive problems. (See related article: [Are Plastic Bottles Bad for You?](#))

More green alternatives to common baby products include toys made from sustainable wood instead of plastic, organic plush toys, organic baby clothes and blankets, and organic bedding and crib mattresses. "For babies, that purity is really important," Dadd says.

8. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

One of the simplest ways to make your life a little greener is to remember the adage "reduce, reuse, recycle." Go with cloth instead of paper napkins, cut up used paper and use the backside for notes instead of buying message pads, and hold garage sales to keep cast-off appliances, clothing, books, and toys in circulation.

"I'm always looking to see what I can do to reuse something or help someone else reuse," Dadd says. You end up saving a tremendous amount of money, as well."

9. Skip the Scented Candles

That mango-strawberry scented candle may evoke freshness and air purity, but that sweet scent is a toxic concoction of chemicals. "Candles aren't very good for you," Ron Beres says. "A single scent can be made up of thousands of chemicals."

Unscented is better, but it is best to go with petroleum-free soy or vegetable-based candles. To achieve a healthy scent, look for 100% essential oils. Or go directly the source and buy

organic flowers at your local farmer's market to freshen up your home.

10. Flip the Switch

You heard it from your parents, and now you're saying it to your own kids. Turn off the lights. Not only will it lower your electricity bill, but flipping the light switch off conserves energy. If you must have the lights on, make sure you replace old bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs, which use less electricity.

According to ENERGY STAR (a joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy), if every American replaced just one regular light bulb with an approved compact fluorescent light bulb, it would conserve enough energy to light more than 3 million homes for a year, save more than \$600 million in annual energy costs and prevent greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions of more than 800,000 cars.

Living green doesn't have to be time-consuming or expensive. A little awareness goes a long way toward a healthier home and planet. In fact, the most effective way to make a difference is to work small changes into your everyday life.

"We live in a modern day society and have to be adaptable," Lisa Beres says. "You don't know what the tipping point is, so everything you do to prevent that from happening is a step in the right direction."

Want to learn more? Get your own copy of [Home Safe Home](#) .

How "Green" Are You?

They say it's not easy being green, but we beg to differ. In this day and age, conservation is key. As the ozone layer whittles away, the water supply dries up and the environmental bleeding continues, many people are taking a stand and going green. Do you know what it takes to do your part? Take our quick [environmental quiz](#) and find out.
