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Underestimated danger: cleaning detergents are not harmless

New UBA pamphlet provides tips on green cleaning

Corrosive and irritant cleaning agents continue to cause a number of health problems in Germany. 665 cases of poisoning from cleaning detergents were registered in 2009 alone. Moreover, the cleaning agents contaminate the environment with chemicals. Jochen Flasbarth, President of the Federal Environment Agency (UBA) comments, "the UBA advises against use of cleaning agents that have the orange labels for identifying of hazardous substances. Use of these agents for household purposes are entirely unwarranted. A new UBA pamphlet on environmentally conscious cleaning (*Umweltbewusst reinigen - nachhaltig und hygienisch*) gives advice on efficient use of laundry detergents and cleaning products and environmentally products.

In principle, all detergents are potentially hazardous. They contain surfactants which could cause poisoning if swallowed. Since 1 August 1990, the date that marks the start of the obligation to report cases of poisoning, nearly 10,000 cases caused by detergents have been registered. These cases were largely related to occupational incidents; in fact, about 90 percent. The remaining 10 or so percent occurred in private households, of which only a small proportion (about one tenth) had medium to severe health effects. However, these cases often involve children.

About a year ago UBA and the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) were forced to ban the trade and sale of a certain cleaning agent, as its high percentage of nitric acid posed a significant consumer risk. The product was only available in a few shops, however. Products that are labelled "corrosive" are especially problematic. These include drain cleaners and oven and sanitary detergents whose improper use can lead to skin irritations, chemical burns or cause damage to the respiratory tract and lungs. "These products can easily be avoided in the household. Alternatives are widely available on the market," says Jochen Flasbarth.

More advice is available in the new UBA pamphlet on environmentally conscious cleaning (*Umweltbewusst reinigen - nachhaltig und hygienisch*). UBA advice is to look for the EU flower, the European eco-label, as products bearing this label must meet strict environmental and health standards. In addition, producers must provide proof of cleaning performance with these products. The pamphlet on environmentally conscious cleaning is also available in Turkish.

Further information and links:

UBA publication *Umweltbewusst reinigen - nachhaltig und hygienisch*.
<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien-e/4162.html>

Ärztliche Mitteilung bei Vergiftungen 2009 publication:
<http://www.bfr.bund.de>

BfR brochure *Protecting Children from Poisoning* in German and Turkish:
http://www.bfr.bund.de/de/presseinformation/2011/35/kinder_vor_vergiftungen_schuetzen-127492.html

Information on green cleaning is available here:
<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/chemikalien/waschmittel/fruehjahrsputz.htm>

For information on the European eco-label see here:
<http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/chemikalien/waschmittel/zeichen.htm>

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