

HOUSEHOLD HAZARDOUS WASTES

Many of the products commonly used in the home pose substantial risks to human health or the environment. These common household products are so familiar that many people do not consider them hazardous. Nevertheless, if improperly used or disposed of, they can result in serious groundwater contamination problems.

What is a Hazardous Material?

The United States Environmental Protection Agency maintains a list of materials it considers hazardous. The list includes over four hundred specific substances, like industrial solvents and battery acid. In addition to this list, the EPA considers a substance hazardous if it is flammable, corrosive, toxic, or reactive or explosive when mixed with other materials.



Most people think of hazardous materials as drums of industrial chemicals that are produced by large industries. In fact, many of the materials around the average American home are hazardous. They can be found in the garage, the basement, the kitchen, and the bathroom. Some of these substances are commonly recognized as dangerous, like kerosene and car batteries. But there are many dangerous substances that are not ordinarily considered hazardous, like automotive fluids, cleaning products, polishes, and some paints.

The Dangers of Hazardous Waste

Many people assume that the quantities of hazardous wastes produced by households are very small relative to other sources. Even though each household may produce relatively small amounts of waste, the total amount produced by all the households in Michigan is substantial. In addition, household hazardous waste is often disposed of improperly in landfills that cannot safely contain dangerous substances. Many businesses must discard their hazardous substances in landfills specifically designed for hazardous waste disposal. Individuals, however, often simply throw out their hazardous wastes with the trash.

Hazardous wastes disposed of in ordinary landfills can pose a significant risk to the groundwater. Water seeping down through the landfill can pick up dangerous waste products and contaminate the groundwater.

What can you do?

There are two important steps you can take to reduce the problems associated with household hazardous wastes: reduce the amount of hazardous materials you use, and dispose of the hazardous materials you do use properly.

There are many ways to reduce the amount of household hazardous wastes you generate. Many chemical products commonly used in the home are not really necessary. There are less harmful alternatives that are often safer to use and less toxic. For more information about alternatives to hazardous household products, request the Watershed Council brochure "Toxics in Your Home".

When you buy hazardous substances, take care to read the label directions carefully. Be sure that the product is appropriate for your intended use. Don't buy more than you know you will need, so there will be little or none left over. If you do have some left over, give it to someone else to use. Be sure to follow label directions for disposal of empty containers.

When you dispose of hazardous materials, special care must be taken. The following list shows many common household items that must be disposed of as hazardous wastes.

Common Hazardous Household Items

These products are considered hazardous by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. If you are unable to use them up for their intended purpose, the unused amounts must be saved for a community-wide hazardous waste collection day, or given to a licensed hazardous waste contractor.

- **Kitchen:** Floor care products, furniture polish, metal polish, and insecticides.
- **Garage:** Gasoline, kerosene, fuel oil, diesel fuel, automatic transmission fluid, battery acid and batteries, brake fluid, motor oil. (Note: many local garages accept used motor oil for recycling. Use this alternative if it is available because it conserves resources.)
- **Workroom:** Oil based paint, paint thinners and strippers, primers, rust removers, turpentine, varnish, and wood preservatives.
- **Lawn and Garden Supplies:** Fertilizers, fungicides, insecticides, and weed killers.
- **Miscellaneous Products:** Ammunition, solvents, fiberglass resins, lighter fluid, camp stove fuel, moth balls.

Many people routinely dispose of other household products down the drain. Even though a product may not be hazardous, there are special considerations you should be aware of if you have a septic system. Some substances that can be handled by municipal wastewater treatment systems can kill the bacteria that make septic systems function properly. These substances include paints, disinfectants, and drain cleaners. Do not pour them down the drain if you have a septic system.

For further Information about household hazardous wastes, contact the Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council.

Other Groundwater Fact Sheets are available on these topics:

What is Groundwater?	Number 1
Nitrate Contamination	Number 2
Septic Tank Maintenance	Number 4
Fuel Storage Tanks	Number 5

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