

## **Hazardous Chemicals in the Restaurant Industry**

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Even though cleaning products are used daily and in large quantities by restaurant operators, many owners and employees are unaware of the hazardous nature of the materials they are coming in contact with. Although there has never been a comprehensive study done on the chemical impact on restaurant industry workers and customers, anecdotal reports and evidence from other industries point to a potential minefield of harmful effects that could impact the hospitality workplace. In addition to the personal threat for employee and customer health from inhalation and skin irritations, and all of the possible long term ramifications they may hold, there are multiple effects that reach beyond the restaurant, such as harmful consequences on wildlife and aquatic systems via the introduction of chemicals down the drain (1). Due to this, it is best for operators to eliminate the risk of problems both within and beyond their restaurant by switching to non-toxic cleaning materials, especially considering the proven effectiveness of those alternatives. This can take place with the introduction of more studies (both within and outside the industry) to further prove the harmful effects of toxic cleaning products. Due to the possible short term and long term negative effects of toxic chemicals, there are multiple benefits of buying green cleaning products, such as decreasing harmful impacts on employees and customers, improving air quality, and reducing water and air pollution, all while effectively getting the cleaning jobs done right (1).

Purchasing green cleaning products has become increasingly easier thanks to the Design for the Environment Safer Product Labeling Program created by the EPA. Their logo on a specific product ensures that it was evaluated by their chemical experts and enables customers to easily choose items that will pose minimal health concerns (2). It is important to note that while non-toxic products are important for the average person, they are especially important in the workplace, where individuals are commonly in contact with hazardous chemicals on a daily and prolonged basis.

Despite the fact that many workers are in contact with toxic products for the majority of their work day, it is extremely difficult to extrapolate the effects on humans, particularly due to the common mixing of various chemicals. Elizabeth Sommer at Design for the Environment, having come to this realization, believes that this creates more of a necessity to choose safer alternatives. Since we cannot directly connect a chemical impact to humans via restaurants, she believes “we must be as protective as possible with the information that is available,” considering limited information creates a dangerous situation due to the many unanswered questions.

With minimal data in our specific industry of concern, it is helpful to look at other industries to give insight into the widespread harmful impacts of all cleaning chemicals. For example, brake cleaners in the auto industry were remanufactured to eliminate the use of solvents due to their known harmful effects; however, without considering the hazards of the new substitutes, more harmful chemicals were introduced which caused widespread nerve damage (3). Thus, it is extremely important to identify the toxins before they are used or even substituted for other chemicals, so that these impacts can be avoided in a way that finds the solution “upstream” to prevent multiple problems “downstream” via an integrated approach (3).

In conclusion, the limited anecdotal and concrete data of hazardous chemical effects in the restaurant industry necessitates the study of impacts in various other industries to demonstrate the severity of toxins to employees and consumers overall. With more research and a simultaneous push for non-toxic products, there is hope that there will be widespread reduction of hazardous cleaning chemicals throughout the United States, especially in the restaurant industry, to create both a safer local and global environment.

#### References

- (1) HYPERLINK "<http://www.epa.gov/epp/pubs/cleaning.htm>" <http://www.epa.gov/epp/pubs/cleaning.htm>
- (2) HYPERLINK "<http://www.epa.gov/dfe/pubs/projects/formulat/saferproductlabeling.htm>" <http://www.epa.gov/dfe/pubs/projects/formulat/saferproductlabeling.htm>
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