



Tip Sheet

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS)

Design, Implement, and Monitor Scent/Fragrance-Free Policies
Empowering Community and Removal of Barriers (ECRoB)



In our pursuit of clean and fresh laundry, it's important to be aware of the broader impacts our choices have on both the environment and our health. Let's uncover the truth behind common myths about laundry products and explore their real effects.

A major concern is the lack of protective legislation that ensures transparency and safety in the products we use. For example, the International Fragrance Association lists over 3,224 ingredients used in products like perfumes, soaps, detergents, and air fresheners, yet their exact compositions remain undisclosed due to proprietary protections. This allows manufacturers to label their products with vague terms like "fragrance" or "perfume" without disclosing the specific chemicals inside. As a result, consumers are often left unaware of potentially harmful substances hidden in these everyday products (1). This gap in protective legislation makes it difficult for consumers to make informed choices, putting their health and the environment at risk.

In the following sections, we'll explore common myths about laundry products and uncover the hidden truths behind them, shedding light on the risks many are unknowingly exposed to.

Myth: Strongly scented laundry products are necessary for effective cleaning.

Fact: The scent in 'regular' laundry products is from synthetic fragrances that do not contribute to cleaning efficacy. A fragrance can contain harmful chemicals like phthalates, which are linked to hormone disruption and reproductive health issues (2). Pregnant women and young children are particularly vulnerable to these effects, as exposure to these substances, which include known neurotoxins, has been associated with developmental issues (3). Synthetic fragrances may contain allergens and irritants that trigger respiratory problems, skin reactions, and headaches in sensitive individuals (4). These exposures have been linked to health issues like breathing difficulties and headaches in approximately one-third of the general population across four countries spanning three continents (5).

Myth: Laundry fumes released from dryer vents are harmless and dissipate quickly.

Fact: Laundry fumes from dryer vents contain harmful chemicals like formaldehyde and benzene, which persist in the air and contribute to air pollution while exposing people to carcinogens (6, 7, 8). These pose serious health risks, especially for individuals with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) and other conditions that depend on air quality for accessibility and inclusion, including asthma, other respiratory conditions, dermatitis, migraines, and autism. Exposure can trigger severe symptoms like brain fog, migraines, respiratory distress, fatigue, and skin reactions. For people with these conditions and especially MCS, these fumes can be

so overwhelming that they prevent outdoor activities, even in their own backyard, when neighbors use conventional laundry products.

Myth: Dryer sheets are necessary to reduce static cling and soften clothes.

Fact: Dryer sheets contain chemicals that coat fabrics to reduce static and give a temporary soft feel to clothing. However, these chemicals, including fragrance additives and surfactants, can irritate skin and emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs), contributing to air pollution (9,10). Choosing alternatives like wool dryer balls not only reduces static cling without using chemicals, but also offers additional benefits such as shorter drying times and reduced wrinkles, making them a more eco-friendly and skin-friendly option.

Myth: Fabric softeners are harmless and improve the longevity of clothing.

Fact: Fabric softeners contain chemicals known as quaternary ammonium compounds (quats), that give a soft feel to fabrics by coating them with a waxy layer. These chemicals can pose several risks (11). Firstly, when washed down drains, they can accumulate in waterways and harm aquatic life due to their toxic effects (12). Additionally, quats have been linked to asthma and other respiratory issues (12). While fabric softeners may give a temporary softness to clothing, their long-term use can actually reduce the absorbency of fabrics like towels and decrease their overall lifespan.

Myth: Going fragrance-free is merely a personal preference and not necessary for accessibility.

Fact: For many individuals with multiple chemical sensitivity, asthma, allergies, and other health conditions, exposure to fragrances can trigger serious and debilitating symptoms such as migraines, respiratory distress, and skin reactions. Going fragrance-free is recognized as a reasonable accommodation under disability laws and guidelines, ensuring equal access and safety for all individuals in shared spaces (13).

Myth: Natural or DIY laundry products are less effective than conventional options.

Fact: Natural alternatives like castile soap, vinegar and baking soda can effectively clean clothes without the use of synthetic chemicals. Vinegar acts as a natural fabric softener and deodorizer, while baking soda helps to remove stains and odors. These ingredients are gentle on fabrics, preserving their quality over time, and are particularly beneficial for individuals with sensitive skin or allergies. Moreover, using natural alternatives reduces the environmental impact associated with conventional laundry products, which often contain harsh chemicals that can pollute indoor and outdoor air, waterways and harm wildlife.

Myth: Choosing fragrance-free products means sacrificing freshness.

Fact: Fragrance-free products can provide a clean and fresh result without the health risks associated with synthetic fragrances. By opting for fragrance-free alternatives, consumers can avoid these health concerns while still achieving effective cleaning and odor elimination. They are a safer choice not only for individuals with multiple chemical sensitivity but also for promoting healthier environments for everyone.

By understanding the true impacts of the products we consume, we can make informed choices that benefit our health and the environment. Choosing eco-friendly alternatives, reducing chemical use, and supporting transparent labeling practices are steps toward creating a safer and more sustainable future.

Consult our [eco-living guide](#) for practical tips on choosing products that promote a safer, eco-conscious lifestyle. Whether you're seeking non-toxic cleaning solutions, personal care items, or more, our guide offers valuable recommendations to help you make informed and environmentally responsible choices for your home and family.

Further reading

1. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. Endocrine disruptors. Retrieved July 22, 2024, from <https://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/endocrine>
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13. Canadian Human Rights Commission. Environmental sensitivities and scent-free policies. Retrieved July 22, 2024, from <https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/en/resources/publications/environmental-sensitivities-and-scent-free-policies>