

## Air Fresheners

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There's something fishy about some air fresheners

By Tom Watson

The Seattle Times, Oct 7, 2006

Straight to the Source

[http://www.organicconsumers.org/2006/article\\_3076.cfm](http://www.organicconsumers.org/2006/article_3076.cfm)

Who doesn't love fresh air?

If you define fresh air as unpolluted outdoor air, the ideal indoor "air freshener" is an open window. But that's not always practical, and it seems that many folks don't necessarily want fresh air in their home. They want air that smells good to them, or at least air that covers up the bad odors.

Hence the booming \$9-billion-a-year home-fragrance industry, which includes air-freshener sprays, plug-ins, battery-powered units, potpourris and candles. This rapidly growing industry continues to introduce creative new air-freshener products with evocative names such as "Country Berries," "Vanilla Breeze," "Wandering Barefoot on the Shore" and, if you really want to get down to business, "Super Odor Killer."

But some of these products may compromise your family's health. In homes where air fresheners were used most days, babies less than 6 months old had 30 percent more ear infections than those where air fresheners were used less than once a week, according to an extensive 1999 study by researchers at the University of Bristol in England. This study also reported that mothers suffered from 25 percent more headaches and 19 percent more depression in homes where aerosols and air fresheners were used frequently.

Last May, University of California, Berkeley researchers reported that three of the four air fresheners they sampled contained substantial quantities of terpenes, chemicals that may react with ozone (also commonly found in indoor air) to produce a number of toxic compounds.

Small children also face risks from simply having these products in the home. They can get spray or oils in their eyes, for example. Poison control centers in the U.S. reported 16,242 incidents of toxic exposure from air fresheners in 2004, says the American Association of Poison Control Centers. More than 80 percent of those exposures involved children under 6

years old.

Some air fresheners pose more of a risk than others. In August, after a study reported that air fresheners may contain the hazardous compound paradichlorobenzene, the S.C. Johnson company issued a press release pointing out that none of its Glade air fresheners or Oust air sanitizer products use that chemical.

But the total chemical composition of most air fresheners remains a closely-guarded secret. The federal government's Household Products Database ([www.householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.householdproducts.nlm.nih.gov)) does provide useful information, by product name, about some air fresheners. For instance, you will learn that aerosol air fresheners often contain the flammable propellants butane and propane. But many air fresheners do not list any specific ingredients, neither in the database nor on product labels or packaging.

The price of "freshness"

In addition to the questionable chemicals in some air fresheners, the newest products often have an additional negative environmental impact: You need batteries or electricity to run them.

The cost of buying sweet smells can quickly add up. Aerosol sprays commonly sell for \$1.79 to \$4, while plug-ins and fan-operated units may cost \$5 to \$15, plus the additional cost of the fragrance refills. Procter & Gamble offers an air-freshener unit for about \$30 that plays "scent discs," using a concept similar to a CD player.

One line of home "air sanitizer" products, Oust from S.C. Johnson, claims to kill odor-causing bacteria in the air rather than just covering up odors. But an aerosol version of this product consists of 25 percent to 35 percent "liquefied, sweetened petroleum gases" and is highly flammable, according to the Household Products Database.

Using sense about scents

Rather than masking odors as most air fresheners do, try to remove odors at the source. Experts from the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County recommend using baking soda to absorb smells on carpets or in garbage cans.

If you want to add an appealing smell to your home, they suggest simmering cloves and cinnamon in water.

For a gentler fragrance than synthetic air fresheners, the nonprofit Organic Consumers Association also recommends sachets of natural dried flowers or herbs, such as roses, lavender and lemon verbena.

Another burning issue

Because candles also send a variety of byproducts into the air, indoor-air

quality expert Thad Godish from Indiana's Ball State University recommends against burning candles in your home more than a few times a week.

Also keep in mind that candles cause more than 23,000 residential fires every year, resulting in 165 deaths and \$390 million in direct property loss, according to the U.S. Fire Administration.

If you do buy candles, make sure the label says, "lead-free wick." Consider beeswax or soy candles as greener alternatives to petroleum-based paraffin candles.

The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at [tom.watson@metrokc.gov](mailto:tom.watson@metrokc.gov). Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at [www.KCecoconsumer.com](http://www.KCecoconsumer.com).