

LAUNDRY ISSUES

IS THERE A NASTY GREMLIN IN YOUR LAUNDRY BASKET?

It was a terrible day, the day I learned that the organic laundry soap I'd been using for the last five years was toxic for me. But there was a layer of excitement under the hysteria. Just imagine – if every stitch of clothing I wore (also including all my dry cleaning, but more of that in a moment), if the towels I used to dry off and even the sheets I curled up in all night long were toxic... just imagine how much my life would improve when the problem was corrected! And already, just in the short term, the change has been massive. The mounting pain in my upper back and rock hard shoulders has melted away. Unnecessary bouts of bad temper, increased distress and emotional oversensitivity that made me feel as if I'd entered a state of perpetual PMS – it all just stopped, as if someone had flipped a switch. I'd put the negativity down to stress – I've begun another rather stressful job – and perhaps to my occasional forays into semi-forbidden chocolate. But, no; I was simply being chemically poisoned on a 24/7 basis.

It made me think of the golden garments Medea fashioned as a wedding gift to the princess who was to supplant her as Jason's wife. She dipped them in the poisonous blood of a monster she'd recently tangled with (she won, of course) and then gave the gown to the daughter of Creon. The golden robes killed the girl, and Creon too, when he tried to save her. And here's the really scary thing – this is not an uncommon problem. It's probably more rare not to have nasty physical (and emotional!) reactions to one's laundry products; most people have symptoms of chemical poisoning, but call them something else. What a brave new world we're living in!

But let's start at the beginning. If you use fabric softener, 99 times out of 100 it will be toxic. If you use those drier sheets, 100 times out of 100 they will absolutely be toxic. Most stain removers are toxic. There are exceptions, of course (except for drier sheets, those are always, always bad) but you'll have to work hard to find non-toxic commercial products to perform these tasks. A couple of non-commercial non-toxic options are to add a quarter cup of baking soda (bicarbonate of soda) to the wash cycle to soften the fabric; or add a quarter cup of white vinegar to the rinse cycle to soften fabric and prevent static cling.

A partial list of the chemicals in commercial fabric softeners and drier sheets includes: benzyl acetate, linked to pancreatic cancer; benzyl alcohol, linked to upper respiratory problems; ethanol, on the EPA hazardous waste list and linked to central nervous system disorders; limonene, a known carcinogen; a-terpineol which can cause respiratory problems, including fatal edema and central nervous system damage; ethyl acetate, a narcotic on the EPA hazardous waste list; camphor, which causes nervous system disorders; chloroform, a carcinogenic neurotoxin and anesthetic; linalool, a narcotic that causes nervous system disorders; and, pentane, a chemical known to be harmful if inhaled. Unmasked, the chemicals in fabric softeners smell horrible. The odor is so strong that heavy chemical fragrances are required to drown out the stink. Fabric softeners were originally designed to take care of problems with synthetic fabrics, namely bad smells, static cling, and a nasty texture. But synthetic fabrics have evolved over time (do you remember your first polyester perma-press shirt thirty or forty years

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ago?) and so have fabric softeners. The first has improved; the second has not. In the meantime advertising tells us that all our clothing needs softeners and drier sheets to feel silky and smell good, even our fluffy cotton towels, our comfortably breathable natural-fiber clothing, and our softly smooth cotton sheets. The chemicals in these products build up over time. If you continue to expose yourself to them, what may have been a little headache, a slight muscle discomfort, a passing bit of moodiness can, over time, take over your life.

I'd never used fabric softeners or laundry sheets, and I thought that by using an environmentally safe laundry detergent I would be protected from chemical poisoning. But I wasn't. I don't know precisely what created the problem in the ecological laundry detergent I was using, but I will ask this; when a detergent sold only through natural health shops is toxic, what sort of effect do you suppose the chemical detergents created by the major conglomerates will have? If every one of the laundry products used in your machines are tested (note that they must be tested with eyes open, and either eyes closed or with the tongue on the roof of the mouth) and if even one is found to be toxic, there are several things you must do.

First, you must thoroughly clean your washer and drier. Residues from detergents, stain removers, bleach, fabric softeners and any other laundry 'helper' that's ever put into your machine clings to your clothing. When you let your friend run a load of laundry a couple of months ago, and he used a fabric softener in the rinse cycle, residue from that is still showing up on your clothes now. That residue also builds up on the inside of your machines. The way to clean your machines is to get a bottle of white vinegar (organic is nice if you can get it) and some baking soda, or bicarbonate of soda, or – in the Netherlands – 'maagzout' or 'natrium bicarbonaat' or 'zuiveringszout'.

To clear my machines I thoroughly saturated a clean kitchen sponge with vinegar and wiped down every surface, including the soap dispensers and the lint catchers, which I took out and rinsed with vinegar. It's a messy, drippy project, but the point is to meticulously drench all surfaces with neutralizing vinegar. Find a good-sized towel and put it in the washing machine. Then put a scant half-cup of baking soda in the dry soap dispenser, and run the cycle on high heat. Put the washed towel into the drier and run that cycle until it's completely dry.

You must test to know whether all traces of the old laundry product residue are gone, but your toxic clothing will minimize your ability to test accurately. You must either strip naked before testing the newly washed and dried towel, or you must have it tested by someone else – a Quantum Techniques practitioner is a good choice. If you've previously used a lot of toxic laundry products, you may have to repeat this cycle of vinegar rinse and baking soda wash three or four times. I was lucky – because I only used organic detergent, and never very much of that, my machines were cleared in one cycle.

Then re-wash your clothes, perhaps starting with a set of sheets and your nightwear – that way you'll have an immediate indication of just how vast is the change you've made

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when you wake up the next morning feeling unusually... great! Please note that when you wash your sheets, you must also wash your mattress pad. Heat and dampness strengthen the toxic residues and cause them to penetrate. You may become quite warm under the covers and there may be a sheen of perspiration on your skin as a result. Any toxicity in your mattress pad will seep up through your bottom sheet in the course of the night.

Speaking of which, other highly sensitive people have noted that they must take enormous care when traveling, as hotel sheets are seldom (if ever!) non-toxic. You may test the sheets before you climb into bed and find that everything is fine. But you may still wake up sick from laundry detergent poisoning because body heat and dampness generated in the night will create problems. The way to conclusively test any cloth is to make a small area of it wet, and then test it. If there are problems – and there very likely are – they will show up then. It's absolutely possible to travel with your own sheets, or even with a lightweight bedroll and your own pillowcases to keep from waking up sick when you travel.

In the manual, Quantum Techniques circulates a list of frequently safe laundry detergents available in the United States. In the Netherlands and Belgium BioTex Voorwas is generally safe but, of course, it must be tested to be sure that it works for all individuals. Another generally safe soap that may be more widely available in Europe is Ossengel Wasmachine.

If you go to a Laundromat, or if you have your clothes washed for you and do not have control over the machines in which your clothes are washed, you've got a different kind of problem to solve. You will have to find, organize or buy machines that you can keep clean and clear of toxic laundry products. There are several ways to do this. If you live in an apartment building with shared machines, you could make a presentation to the other occupants, demonstrating just how dangerous most laundry products are. If you must use a Laundromat, you could speak with the owner – it might be possible to have one washer and drier set aside for those who only use particular products. An effort of this sort would have a greater chance of success if you were able to convince a number of other Laundromat patrons to join you in maintaining a safe, healthy, non-toxic and poison-free laundry environment. If you have neither the energy nor the time to organize a major social campaign, you may have to buy a small machine for home use. A Quantum Techniques practitioner, Stephen Parlee, has discovered that inexpensive machines are available from:

- Wonder Washer \$49.99 at www.drleonards.com or www.carolwrightgifts.com
- Cyclone Washmate Washer Machine \$79.95 at www.gadgetuniverse.com
- Hairer Portable HLP21E around \$199 or HLP20E around \$184 found at www.target.com

Machines for \$200 and up can be found at:

- www.compactappliances.com
- www.thorappliances.com

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Compact machines are also available in Europe.

Dry cleaning is another challenging issue. I've read that there are over 30,000 dry cleaning facilities in the United States, but that some 95 percent of them use a toxic chemical, perchloroethylene (PERC) as the primary cleaning solvent. The National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences states that, 'Short-term exposure to PERC can cause adverse health effects on the nervous system that include dizziness, fatigue, headaches, sweating, lack of coordination, and unconsciousness. Long-term exposure can cause liver and kidney damage.' PERC is classified as a probable carcinogen. A law was passed in the Netherlands that mandates that any dry cleaner renewing their machines must replace them with machines that do not use PERC solvents. Non-PERC dry cleaners are wonderfully simple to find here, but you do have to ask.

It might be a little more work to find non-toxic dry cleaners in America, but most cities will have at least one. Check the yellow pages and google the availability of non-PERC cleaners. It's absolutely worth the time and trouble to find them. It's seriously nasty to learn that something so basic to your life – your clothing and your bedding – is poisonous and toxic. But the rewards for clearing this problem are immediate, and huge. It's an investment of time and money that will pay you back a thousand-fold.

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