



Healthy Homes, Healthy People Green Labels: Are They Worth It?

Many people think “green” products are more expensive than conventional cleaning products. Although this was true a few years ago, prices have come down and there is very little to no difference *in price* between “green” products and conventional ones.

As more people become aware of using less hazardous products, there is an issue you need to be aware of: **greenwashing**.

What is “greenwashing”?

When a company or organization spends more money and time on marketing that it is “green” (environmentally friendly) than actually **being** “green” in their business practices, they are misleading you.



How Do I Spot Greenwashing?

Don't get greenwashed, follow these tips:

“Green” logo	Look for a standardized “green” logo or seal. This is one of your best clues to assure you are paying for “green” friendly products. (Read more on page 2.)
Integrity	Is there a hidden trade-off? For example, if the label boasts a product was harvested in a sustainable way but does not indicate anything about the environmental impact from production, there may be a hidden trade-off.
Look for proof	You usually won't find detailed information and specifications on a product. However, the packaging should direct you to where you can find this kind of information, such as the company's contact information, third-party certifiers, websites or 800 numbers. If they don't, beware.
Beware of buzzwords	Look for buzzwords (see page 3) and see whether the claims are substantiated. If there is no explanation, the label is meaningless. For example, arsenic and lead are “all natural,” but they are also serious toxins.
Know if claims are irrelevant	Do all the products in the same category make the same claim? For example, the term <i>CFC-free</i> is irrelevant. Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) were banned years ago. There will be no products that carry them.
Is the claim true?	The most commonly seen one are seals that don't mean anything. Any major verifiable seal (like Green Seal) can be easily checked.
Beware of lesser of two evils	Look at the big picture. Is the claim trying to lure you to buy the product but it really is not good for your health or the environment? For example, organic cigarettes may be made from organic tobacco but smoking is still not a healthy practice.

Tips on Buying “Green” Products

Look for the following eco-labels. These labels are standardized (International Organization for Standardization) and recognized throughout the world. This is the most useful tool to help you prevent being greenwashed.



Green Seal: A highly meaningful label. This is an independent organization whose purpose is to set standards for and certify environmentally friendly products. Every product must meet their criteria standards. Their sources of support are independent from products tested. For more information on this label, see www.greenseal.org.

EcoLogo: Founded by the Government of Canada, it is now recognized worldwide. It is a highly respected environmental standard and certification mark. If you see the EcoLogo on a product, you can be assured that the product’s entire life cycle was examined and the product was verified by an independent third party as complying to the EcoLogo’s program criteria. For more information on this label, see www.ecologo.org.

Design for the Environment U.S. EPA: This label is placed on products that meet stringent criteria for human and environmental health. Using these products can protect your family’s health and the environment. You can be assured that if you see this label on a product, then it is considered an effective yet safer alternative. A team of scientists will award this label to a product after every ingredient has been screened for potential health and environmental effects. You can be assured if you see this label that the product contains only those ingredients that pose the least concern among chemicals in their class. For more information about this label, see www.epa.gov/dfe.

*If the product does not have a seal, **read the ingredients** and the labels on the bottle. Review the company’s reputation. By law, companies are not required to disclose the ingredients in their products. Some products will have only some of the ingredients listed. The more disclosure and explanation there is, the more confident you can be that you are purchasing a “green” product.*

“Green” Buzzwords

Beware of the following **buzzwords**. Although products that carry these buzzwords may be perfectly fine to use, that is not always the case for all products.

Biodegradable	Should mean that the product or packaging can be degraded when exposed to air, moisture, bacteria or other organisms. The materials should break down and return to nature within a reasonably short amount of time. This label is somewhat useful but it is not verified, certified nor standardized. To be more sure, look for “ Certified Biodegradable, ” which means the product was certified and tested against industry standards. Please note, however, that this does not necessarily mean the product is 100% biodegradable.
100% Vegan	Implies that the product was not tested on animals nor were any animal-derived ingredients used for production. These claims can often times be false. Check the ingredient panel instead. There is not even a standard definition. Not meaningful. “ Certified Vegan ” is more meaningful.
Cruelty Free, no animal testing	Implies that the product did not use animals for testing. There is no standard definition and no verification for this label. It is not meaningful and can be misleading.
Eco-safe, Environmentally friendly, preferable, or safe	Implies the packaging or product has some kind of environmental benefit or that it causes no harm to the environment. There is no standard definition for these terms and no organization that independently certifies these claims. Not meaningful.
Phosphate free	Phosphates soften water but create havoc on the environment through the overgrowth of weeds and algae, killing fish and causing foul odors. This label implies that the product contains no phosphate chemicals. The label is somewhat meaningful but sometimes misleading. Phosphates are not found in liquid laundry detergents, and most companies have discontinued their use in powdered detergents. However, automatic dishwashing detergents in powder, gel or tablet form still contain phosphates in many products. If you see this label on dishwashing detergent, this does relate to an environmental benefit for the product to be “phosphate free” and can be verified by the label (should not have more than 8.7% phosphates by weight). Although there is no certification for this label, the meaning is consistent in the industry.
No sodium laurel sulfate or laureth sulfate	These ingredients are known for their foaming and cleaning abilities. This label is somewhat meaningful and means that the product does not contain this ingredient. This is helpful because some people may choose to avoid products with these ingredients. Although studies have not found a link with cancer, this ingredient can cause skin and eye irritation as well as allergy/sensitivity. Although there is no third-party verification or certification, this is a specific claim.

Non-toxic	Implies that the product will not cause adverse short-term or long-term health effects. This label is not meaningful because there are no industry standards by which this claim can be verified or certified. Some companies may assume that a product is non-toxic if its ingredients do not fall under the list of “toxic” ingredients from the Consumer Product Safety Commission.
Septic-tank safe	This label implies that the product is safe to use in septic tank systems. Instructions for cleaning septic tanks include that most products are safe to use for cleaning as long as they are used sparingly and in accordance with the product label. This label is not meaningful . For advice on taking care of septic tanks, contact the National Small Flows Clearinghouse (funded by the Environmental Protection Agency) at 1-800-624-8301.
Green Seal	Very meaningful. See page 2.
Non-fuming	This label implies that the product does not give off vapors (or gases), dusts or smoke. This label is not meaningful because there is no standard definition for this term, and it is non-specific (cannot be measured).



To find out how you can go completely “green,” refer to our “Clean and Green” publication.

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