

Article Last Updated: 3/18/2005 01:32 PM

## Reduce your chemical dependency

Inside Bay Area

### HOW TO HEAT FOOD IN THE MICROWAVE

What really happens when you reheat your leftovers in that yogurt container?

Chemicals leach out of plastic, particularly when that plastic is used for fatty foods such as meat and cheese, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. That's as true for the refrigerator as the microwave.

But plastics intended for food use — Tupperware and Saran Wrap, to name two — meet higher FDA health standards. And don't forget the positive: That same plastic helps keep food fresh and free of other contaminants.

Nevertheless, the FDA and the American Plastics Council do offer some tips:

- Loosely drape microwave-safe plastic wrap over food.
- Leave an inch or more between plastic wrap and food.
- Never use the following in the microwave: take-out food containers, margarine or yogurt tubs, plastic storage bags or grocery bags.
- Trays and containers provided with microwave meals are one-time-use items. Don't make them everyday dishes.
- Still skeptical? A glass or ceramic plate over a similar bowl does the job, too.

More information: [www.plasticsinfo.org/microwave/](http://www.plasticsinfo.org/microwave/)

### HOW TO CLEAN CARPET

Think of your carpet as a large, flat air filter: most airborne particles and soil end up there. Add the compounds already in the carpet — vinyl backing, fire retardants, chemical surfactants — and you've got quite a mix.

When the folks at the Berkeley Ecology Center — epicenter of chemical-free living — want their carpet cleaned, they call one man: Jonathan Cook, of Jonathan's On-the-Spot Cleaning. He and the Ecology Center offer the following tips:

- Use a biodegradable, preferably vegetable-based soap when shampooing carpet.
- Calistoga mineral water makes an excellent spot-remover. Use a clean terry cloth to blot out spots as soon after the spill as possible.
- Avoid products containing tetrachloroethylene (spot remover) or hydrofluoric acid (rust remover).
- Be persistent. Not all spots come out easily.
- For fruit and wine spots: immediately blot with a towel and add cold water, continuing to blot.
- Grease: boiling water followed with dry baking soda
- Blood: cold water or hydrogen peroxide. Or try a paste of cornstarch, corn meal or talcum powder. Allow to dry and brush away.
- Rust: saturate with lemon juice and rub with salt.

### HOW TO GET RID OF ANTS

When it's 3 a.m. and a line of ants has found your dog's food bowl, you reach for the can of insecticide first and ask questions later.

That's understandable. Here's some suggestions from the Berkeley Ecology Center for when you're more awake:

- First remove the ants. Vacuuming them with cornstarch will suffocate them. If they're in a potted plant, take it outside and flood it.
- Then remove the attraction. Ant-attractive food — honey, sugar, cough syrup — goes in the fridge or jars with rubber gaskets and lids with a metal clamp. A screw-top jar with wax paper between the lid and jar also works. Cookies go in

plastic containers.

- Pet food needs a moat — put the food bowl in a larger, shallow tray or pie pan filled with water. Or wash the bowl after your pet finishes eating.
- Clean the ant trail with a citrus-based cleaner.
- Set ant bait stations near entry points or trails. Borax and boric acid are the least toxic to mammals and work slowly, allowing foraging ants to spread it through the colony.

#### **HOW TO CLEAN UPHOLSTERY WHEN YOUR CHILD'S BEEN SICK**

Kid throw up in the car? Clean up with some basic chemistry. Vomit is an acid. Neutralize it and that smell with baking soda — a base, or acid's chemical opposite.

- Clean the mess as best you can with ordinary soap and water.
- Make a slurry with baking soda and water and apply generously to the soiled area.
- Let dry and vacuum away the powder.

#### **FIVE WAYS TO REDUCE YOUR BODY BURDEN**

Here are five quick ways to reduce your exposure to various environmental contaminants, from Dr. Gina Solomon, an associate director at the University of California, San Francisco, Pediatric Environmental Health Speciality Unit and the co-author of "Generations at Risk: Reproductive Health and the Environment."

- Avoid cigarette smoke. "That is just a walking smokestack right there," she said.
- Avoid fish high in mercury and PCBs, such as swordfish, shark, tuna steaks and farm-raised salmon.
- Eat a low-fat diet. Pollutants like brominated flame retardants concentrate as they work up the food chain. So avoid the burgers and binges on ice cream and rich cheeses. "I don't mean never eat them, but just keep them down."
- Watch what you apply to your skin. If possible, pick natural or unscented cosmetics — ones without a lot of chemicals. "That might mean avoiding nail polish, but it's one of the major sources of phthalates."
- If you're buying a computer or TV, make sure it's free of polybrominated diphenyl ethers, or PBDEs. Most major manufacturers have phased them out, but not all.

---

To read more of **A Body's Burden**, visit [www.insidebayarea.com/bodyburden/](http://www.insidebayarea.com/bodyburden/).