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How to Achieve Safer Shopping Results



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This article is the second in a [six-part series](#) focused on helping consumers choose safer products that align with their values.

A recent [consumer survey](#) found that 68.3 percent of Americans want to use their power as consumers to influence corporate practices, and the label they care about most — by a wide margin — is “non-toxic.”

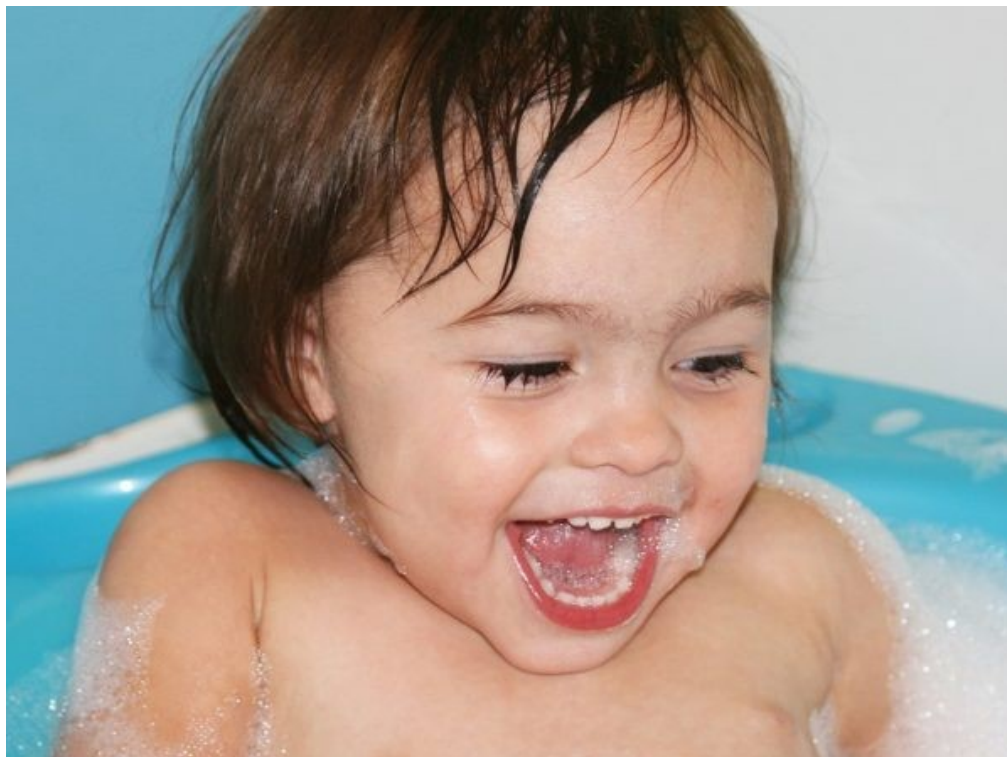
It makes sense that consumers want to use safe products that won't poison their families or the environment. But if avoiding poison is an obvious first step for consumers, manufacturers have made [shopping your values](#) complicated.

But product packaging regularly makes claims of “nontoxic,” “all natural,” and “no artificial ingredients” that imply, but do not guarantee, enhanced product safety.

What Does Nontoxic Mean?

The U.S. [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#) (CPSC) is the federal regulatory agency charged with protecting the public against unreasonable risks from consumer products. They are involved in developing safety standards and can issue recalls for products that fail to meet them. Many safety standards relate to packaging and handling, rather than the safety of the product itself. In part because any substance can be toxic in sufficient quantities, federal law provides definitions of toxic or nontoxic for specific product categories, [such as bottled water](#). However, there is no universal definition for “nontoxic.”

Terms like “natural” are defined for meats. But for products from cleaning supplies to packaged foods, there are no regulations specifically governing the use of terms like “nontoxic,” “toxin-free,” or “all natural” in product packaging. Fortunately, there are independent certification and labeling systems that identify safer products.



Toxicity is usually of greatest concern for products that people apply directly to their bodies. Photo credit: [galiazaharjeva](#) on Pixabay

Safer Labels

MADE SAFE

[MADE SAFE](#) is an American nonprofit organization that provides comprehensive human health-focused certification for a wide variety of consumer products. The label ensures that a product is made entirely from ingredients that are not known or suspected to harm human health. MADE SAFE screens product ingredients against a database of known harmful chemicals compiled from organizations and agencies around the world. They also consider the potential for [bioaccumulation, persistence](#), and general or aquatic toxicity.

Green Seal

Following the EPA's requirements for third-party certification, [Green Seal](#) certifies products and services, with a focus on cleaning products and household items. They also certify cleaning services, hotels, and restaurants. Informed by common industry practices and major health and environmental impacts specific to each project category, their standards require "leadership" from manufacturers. So, certified products are not necessarily nontoxic, but should be less toxic than whatever is typical for the product type.

EWG Verified

The [Environmental Working Group](#) (EWG) provides consumers with educational resources for making safer shopping choices. Their EWG Verified label confirms that a product is free from EWG's chemicals of concern. The product must also meet standards for manufacturing processes and transparency in identifying ingredients. So far, they have only certified personal care products, but they are working to add cleaning products in the future.

Related Terms

Claims like "all natural" or "no artificial ingredients" are based on the assumption that synthetically manufactured materials are inherently dangerous. In many cases this may be true. However, many toxins are entirely natural. The FDA maintains that [additives](#) — even artificial ones — can improve product safety, and makes no distinctions based on whether a product is synthetic or naturally

derived. Claims of naturalness are most commonly seen on [processed foods](#), which have questionable health value regardless of whether they contain artificial ingredients.

Data Instead of Labels

Toxicity is usually of greatest concern for products that people apply directly to their bodies. While the FDA regulates food safety, personal care and beauty products are among the least regulated industries in the U.S. In the absence of strong regulations, safer shoppers need to educate themselves.

Two resources are the [Campaign for Safe Cosmetics](#) and the [EWG Skin Deep Database](#). The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics coalition is a project of Breast Cancer Prevention Partners (formerly the Breast Cancer Fund). They endorse the MADE SAFE label and provide information about chemicals of concern and product safety. The EWG database ranks skin care products based on their toxicity.

No Easy Answers

Safer shoppers should ignore meaningless marketing terms in favor of transparent standards-based certifications, where they are available. Consumers must also educate themselves about known toxins and abandon impulse shopping in favor of [researching safer products](#) or making their own [cleaning supplies](#) and [personal care](#) products. American consumers can also let their elected representatives know that they support consumer safety regulations and labeling laws.

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