

**Oh the time it takes to feed children! Just as breakfast prepping, serving, and cleaning is done, it's time for snack. Then lunch. Then snack. And then dinner. Even if you like to cook, it's exhausting.**

So let's take a break from food for a minute.

Why? Because a healthy kitchen extends beyond food. There is a lot to be said about choosing organic/local, GMO- and hormone/antibiotic-free foods for the endless parade of meals that get churned out of most family kitchens, but advice on avoiding exposure to unsafe chemicals in everything from cookware, food storage materials, and even cleaning products used on kitchen counters is all too rare.

Here's how to easily stock your kitchen—beyond food—safely. Start with your pots, pans, and bakeware. Move on to food storage. Next, tackle tabletop. Finish with cleanup. It's that simple.

## Getting Started On A Budget

If you're concerned a healthy kitchen is too pricey, never fear. There are tons of inexpensive options. The following tips are even free.



1. Chances are you already own a (very safe) cast iron pan you're not using. Break it out!
2. Need to replace plastic cups or food storage containers? (Re)use glass jelly jars.
3. To reduce indoor air pollution, open your windows.

## POTS, PANS, AND BAKEWARE

Cooking surfaces can release the materials they're made from into your food, especially when heated. This process is called leaching. To stop unsafe chemicals from getting into your meals, scrutinize your pots, pans, and bakeware to see what—if anything—needs replacing.

### STEP 1: Ditch The Nonstick

Traditional nonstick pans have no place in a healthy kitchen. In the mid-2000s, scientists discovered nonstick cookware sold under brand names like Teflon and SilverStone emitted toxic fumes of a chemical called perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) when heated. PFOA accumulates in our bodies and has been linked to developmental effects, various cancers, and immune and endocrine system damage. Regulators stepped in and manufacturers agreed to remove PFOA from consumer products by 2015. PFOA is now virtually out of the cookware picture and bodily levels are said to be falling with the phase-out; nearly 100% of Americans had PFOA in their blood.



Unfortunately a chemical called polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) remains in many nonstick pans. Both the International Agency for Research on Cancer and the National Toxicology Program classify PTFE as a possible cause of cancer. Animal studies also suggest it damages the kidneys, elevates cholesterol, causes thyroid disease, and reduces fertility. All of the above means it's a smart precautionary step to choose safer cook- and bakeware.

### STEP 2: Choose The Three Safest Cooking Materials

Memorize this trio and you can't go wrong: cast iron, enamel-coated cast iron, and stainless steel. Cast iron is safe, cheap, and so durable you can use your grandmother's hand-me-downs. Enamel-coated cast iron is expensive, but it's an excellent, durable splurge; the coating is composed of fine glass particles. Glass is as nonreactive and safe as it gets. Stainless steel is also considered safe, plus it's lightweight and sturdy.

## Got aluminum?

There's some debate about the relationship between aluminum exposure and Alzheimer's disease. Certain studies suggest a connection, others don't. Some people choose to ditch aluminum cookware as a precautionary step. If you use it, avoid acidic foods or aluminum will leach into your meal. (Anodized aluminum is said not to leach or react with acids.)



## FOOD STORAGE

The only thing you need to know about food storage? Avoid plastic. Many plastics contain hormone-disrupting chemicals and other potentially harmful substances that can and do release into your food. Heat, acidic foods, and fat in oils, meats, and cheese can all boost this migration. While some plastics have been considered safer by the scientific community for a while (#2, #4, and #5), new studies keep popping up indicating that the less plastic you have in your life, the better.

### STEP 1: Get Up To Speed On BPA

There are many potentially harmful substances used to manufacture plastic, but when it comes to food storage, bisphenol-A (BPA) is talked about most. This chemical, used to make hard #7 polycarbonate plastics as well as food can liners, has been linked to abnormal brain development, cancer, obesity, reproductive issues, and endocrine disruption. The U.S. has no federal ban, but consumers have spoken, and so BPA-free products have flooded the market. Unfortunately the label "BPA-free" doesn't guarantee safety. There is no one regulating every product using this claim. Plus, BPA replacement chemicals can be just as problematic. One set of tests found that over 70% of 455 products advertised as BPA-free, including food storage containers, released different but equally potent endocrine-disrupting chemicals when subjected to heat and light. No thanks!

## STEP 2: Bye Bye Plastic

Plastic wears a convenience halo, but it isn't durable and it should be washed by hand. There are safer and equally convenient options. Look beyond BPA- and phthalate-free plastics to alternatives like glass, stainless steel, and lead-free ceramic. There will still be plenty of plastic in your kitchen after you replace your food storage containers. Plastic is so pervasive; it's smart to minimize your foods' exposure to it when and where you can.

### Lunch Time

Sometimes glass isn't an option. Thankfully there's a wealth of new plastic-free "eco" reusables on the market to tuck into lunchboxes, diaper bags, and more. Choose them.



## TABLETOP

Set the table, clear the table. Set the table, clear the table. It's endless, right? Soon the kids will be old enough to take over this task. Before they do, make sure what you're setting the table with is as healthy as can be.

### STEP 1: Set A Safer Table

Your best bets for dishware are lead-free ceramic or glass. Another option is stainless steel dishes and cups, if that's a look you like. Cups should be glass. Avoid reusable plastics and anything disposable. Utensils are a direct route of ingestion; they go in your mouth. So avoid plastic, even on utensil handles; you may not chew on them, but chances are your kids will. Flatware can also contain lead, a potent neurotoxin. Opt for durable stainless steel or silver. And swap all paper products for cloth. Not only will you save some trees, you'll take some BPA off the table; it can be found in recycled paper products.



### STEP 2: Kids' Gear

It's the rare family that doesn't set up their youngest eaters with tiny plastic spoons, sippy cups, and plates. The thought is that they need small stuff and that they break everything in sight. But plastic tableware can expose kids to unwanted chemicals. Many kids' items are made of melamine, which is created with formaldehyde, a known carcinogen. This tiny spoon phase is over quickly, so just offer your baby whatever you use. Small stainless steel espresso spoons work for those little mouths. Try stainless steel prep bowls. Put drinks in stainless steel sippy cups.

### Safe Shine

Polish silver with a natural, fluoride-free toothpaste. It works wonders. You don't want the residue of conventional silver polish—which contains harsh chemicals—with baby's applesauce.



## CLEAN UP

The problem with cooking? Cleaning. A safe kitchen should be cleaned with kid- and eco-friendly products. They won't pollute indoor air or leave harsh chemical residues on food prep surfaces and dishes.

### STEP 1: Choose Natural Cleaners

Because conventional cleaning product formulas are currently government protected as trade secrets, there's no telling what's in any given spray bottle. Wild but true! We do know that cleaners frequently contain hazardous chemicals linked to cancer, reproductive and developmental disorders, neurological and behavioral problems, hormonal disruption, and other things no parent wants to serve with dinner. In the absence of ingredient lists, the only way families can skirt these chemicals is to scan cleaner labels for warnings. If a bottle has a skull and crossbones, or the word "danger" or "poison" on it, don't buy it! Opt instead for a natural or "green" product. Legitimate natural product companies voluntarily list their ingredients. Read them. Third party certification should back up any claims. This goes for dishwashing soap and detergent, too; its residue remains on all plates and utensils.



### STEP 2: How and What to Clean

In the average home, antibacterial and disinfecting products are chemical overkill. You just don't need them. If you want to disinfect after, say, prepping chicken or shoeing kitty off the counter, that's up to you. Instead of a conventional disinfectant containing toxic chemicals, try warm soapy water and elbow grease. For something stronger, use a product containing kid- and eco-friendly hydrogen peroxide; it's registered by the EPA as an antimicrobial pesticide. You can even make DIY cleaners with tried and true pantry staples like vinegar and lemon. Tea tree, thyme, and oregano essential oils are known to work on germs. Do keep in mind that most of the microbes on and around us are harmless and possibly even beneficial. According to the "hygiene hypothesis," ordinary bacterial exposures help children's immune systems develop. It's still important to wash hands—thoroughly and frequently—with regular old plant-based soap and water. It's also important to wash your sponge. If it smells, you probably have bacterial colonization, which can transfer to the surfaces you wipe. Boil or microwave it, or stick it in the dishwasher. Replace frequently.

### Ventilate, Ventilate, Ventilate!

The EPA says most indoor air is 2 to 5 times more polluted than the air outside—even in urban areas. Using natural cleaners in the kitchen will reduce this pollution, but ventilation is key. Always use your stove's hood. And open the windows—even in winter—to clear out gas stove and oven combustion by-products, chemical vapors from the dishwasher, and other common indoor pollutants.



**In partnership with U•Konserve:** A complete line of quality, safe and reusable food-storage solutions for the whole family. Ideal for school lunches, work, travel, picnics, takeout, leftovers and more.

**CALL TO ACTION:** If you don't think kitchens should contain this many potential pitfalls, speak up for chemical reform! [www.ewg.org/kid-safe-chemicals-act-blog/sign-petition-b](http://www.ewg.org/kid-safe-chemicals-act-blog/sign-petition-b)