

Bridging the gap



Many of us take for granted the basic choices we make each and every day to maintain a clean and healthy home. From the cleaning products we use to the simple choices we make at grocery stores, we have a foundation to make relatively sound decisions. But, many people are unfamiliar with the potential dangers associated with some of these choices. This is especially true for recent immigrant and refugee families and non-English-speaking residents.

For example, it is well known that ammonia and bleach should not be mixed. But for immigrants and refugees, and especially those with limited English, this knowledge is not so common. Earlier this year, a mother from Ethiopia was cleaning her house and mixed the two chemicals. For someone unaware, the action seems sensible: combine two individually capable products to create a more effective cleaning solution. To her alarm, a noxious gas formed and worked its way through her nasal passages and lungs. Fortunately, she was able to avoid any severe consequences, but not without acquiring a nasty cough and some legitimate panic.

When ammonia and bleach are combined, the by-product is chlorine gas. This gas can cause massive cellular damage to the nasal passages, trachea, and lungs – sometimes resulting in death. The young mother was fortunate to escape before becoming unconscious and dangerously over-exposed to the gas.

A week after the woman mixed the cleaning agents, an ECOSS Amharic-speaking home instructor visited the family and learned about the incident. We helped them identify and understand the “Warning”, “Caution” and “Danger” labels on American cleaning products. We invited the young mother to visit a store with us, where we explained the potential risks of using the different products. Afterwards, we provided her and her family with a free Free Green Cleaning Kit. She now consistently uses safer and more environmentally responsible products and has ECOSS as a resource for any questions concerning the environment and health in the home.



For more information, contact ECOSS For Home programs: forhome@ecoss.org or call (206) 767-0432.