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Many people will remember a famous TV ad where a woman races to her washing machine, fabric softener in hand, only to arrive just as the wash ends. This woman who "forgot to add the fabric softener" was actually doing herself and her family a favor.

Although they may make your clothes feel soft and smell fresh, fabric softener and dryer sheets are some of the most toxic products around. And chances are that the staggering 99.8 percent of Americans who use common commercial detergents, fabric softeners, bleaches, and stain removers would think twice if they knew they contained chemicals that could cause cancer and brain damage.

Here is a list of just some of the chemicals found in fabric softeners and dryer sheets:

- **Benzyl acetate:** Linked to pancreatic cancer
- **Benzyl Alcohol:** Upper respiratory tract irritant
- **Ethanol:** On the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Hazardous Waste list and can cause central nervous system disorders
- **A-Terpineol:** Can cause respiratory problems, including fatal edema, and central nervous system damage
- **Ethyl Acetate:** A narcotic on the EPA's Hazardous Waste list
- **Camphor:** Causes central nervous system disorders
- **Chloroform:** Neurotoxic, anesthetic and carcinogenic
- **Linalool:** A narcotic that causes central nervous system disorders
- **Pentane:** A chemical known to be harmful if inhaled

So how could products with pretty names like Soft Ocean Mist, Summer Orchard, and April Fresh be so dangerous?

The chemicals in fabric softeners are pungent and strong smelling -- so strong that they require the use of these heavy fragrances (think 50 times as much fragrance) just to cover up the smells. Furthermore, synthetic fabrics, which are the reason fabric softeners were created in the first place, do not smell good either when heated in a dryer or heated by our bodies ... hence the need for even more hefty fragrances.

In other words, remove all the added fragrance that endears people to fabric softeners and -- like the cliché wolf in sheep's clothing -- the real smells of the chemical-laced fabric softener and the synthetic fabrics they were designed around may prompt people to shoot their laundry machines and be done with it.

### **Are "Soft" Clothes Worth It?**

Fabric softeners are made to stay in your clothing for long periods of time. As such, chemicals are slowly released either into the air for you to inhale or onto your skin for you to absorb. Dryer sheets are particularly noxious because they are heated in the dryer and the chemicals are released through dryer vents and out into the environment.

Health effects from being exposed to the chemicals in fabric softeners include:

- Central nervous system disorders
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Dizziness
- Blood pressure reduction
- Irritation to skin, mucus membranes and respiratory tract
- Pancreatic cancer

### **Soften Your Clothes Safely With These Tips:**

Even if you don't feel the effects of these chemicals today, they can affect you gradually over time, and children, whose systems are still developing, are particularly at risk. There's really no reason to expose yourself to these risky chemicals when natural alternatives exist. Not only are they safer for you, your family and the environment, but they're much more economical too:

- Add a quarter cup of baking soda to wash cycle to soften fabric
- Add a quarter cup of white vinegar to rinse to soften fabric and eliminate cling
- Check out your local health food store for a natural fabric softener that uses a natural base like soy instead of chemicals

It's likely that fabric softeners and dryer sheets aren't the only toxic products in your home. Many household products that consumers regard as safe are also full of toxic chemicals. Our past articles on PEG Compounds in Cosmetics and Phenols in Common Household Cleansers are two of the all-time most popular articles on SixWise.com and will make you more aware of the pervasiveness of harmful chemicals that can be eliminated from your home.