**Healthy Living - Healthy Ingredients**

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**Short introduction**



Sustainability and health are issues that are very much interlinked. Ultimately, even with ever increasing pollution and CO2 output, our planet will survive. The question is whether or not us humans will be able to live in the ever changing conditions. Will the world be a healthy place to live if we continue to pollute our environment? The health of the planet directly affects our own wellbeing and happiness, which is why we place such importance on it as a company who is committed to making a difference.



Ecover considers ‘health’ to be a central theme in our mission of making a healthy and sustainable lifestyle easy. The WHO (World Health Organization) defines health as “the state of complete mental, physical and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity.”

The mental aspect of a healthy lifestyle involves feeling balanced and stable within oneself: being generally satisfied and happy with life. Good physical health is considered to be the absence of diseases, the absence of physical pain, and being fit. Equally significant to overall health is social well-being: feeling accepted in the social environment and having good relationships with friends and family.



With the aim of making a healthy and sustainable lifestyle easy, ’health’ sits at the centre of what we do and should be interpreted as a holistic concept that includes the various aspects of well-being. Of course, as a company our influence on mental and social health is limited, so the main area where we can have a positive impact is physical health. Even so, we have a responsibility to consider the other two aspects in our work.

**Physical wellbeing:** At Ecover, we design our products to be part of the eco-system rather than disturbing or disrupting it. This means we use plant-based ingredients as much as possible, which tend to be better for human health than synthetic, chemical alternatives. However, not all ‘natural’ products are better or safer. To understand the risks a product can have on one’s health, it helps to look at the following equation used by toxicologists:

risk = toxicity X exposure.

This means that something can have a high eco-toxicity (a nasty chemical, for example) but if you are only exposed to it at a very low dosage there is, in theory, no health risk. On the other hand, if you are constantly exposed to a substance that has a low toxicity, the health risk could be significantly increased. On the surface this seems like a logical risk assessment. But at Ecover we look into it a little more critically, using something we call the precaution principle. This involves questioning why we should accept chemicals with a high toxicity if there are alternatives that are perfectly safe? Even if the exposure is limited, as is the case with most washing and cleaning products (not so for cosmetics), why take the risk? Toxicologists cannot predict the long term effect of chemicals, especially newly created synthetic ones. And the above equation doesn’t take into account the effect of exposure to a cocktail of many different chemicals. It would be impossible to test all the different combinations that are out there, so who knows what the effects could be.

The closer we stay to ‘natural’ molecules, the more evidence we have about the potential risks to humans. Because they have always been around, we have enough empirical evidence to know which ones are ok and not ok and at which dosage they start to become a risk.

A second principle we adopt involves a commitment to using the best available ingredients. Referred to in literature as the ‘Best Available Technique’ (BAT), it means we guarantee that we will always make the safest selection of ingredients for our customers. We rigorously screen all available ingredients and make our decisions based on a best possible scoring in our product diamond model (an Ecover model that evaluates the complete life cycle of the final product). Through the activities of our internal lab, we are actively involved in creating these ‘best available ingredients’.

To summarize, when it comes to physical health risks, Ecover applies the precaution principle and the BAT:

1. Precaution principle: if there is a safer alternative available that does the job, why not use it? You never know the long term risks.
2. Best Available Technique (BAT): if there is a safe plant based alternative that does the job, why not use it? It will be less likely that we will encounter surprises regarding health risks in the long run.

As well as toxicity, we also need to look at the kind of exposure. Different kinds of exposure pose different risks. We can break it down into the following areas: oral exposure (through eating), contact exposure (through touching) and inhaling exposure (through breathing). The below examples clarify these further and more importantly, explain how Ecover’s approach makes a difference compared to conventional brands.

Oral exposure: Non-food products are never meant to be eaten. Yet in a lot of cases, indirect oral exposure is a very real possibility. Residues might be present on cutlery or on the table where you eat. Babies and small children playing on a freshly cleaned floor might get exposed to residues of the product used to clean them. Take automatic dishwasher products as an example. Many of these contain zinc or Benzotriazole that have clearly been identified as highly toxic (see link further info). Conventional producers claim that the exposure is so low that there is no risk for the consumer. But Ecover uses the precaution principle and uses safer alternatives ingredients that don’t pose any harm, just in case.

Direct contact exposure: This type of exposure involves the product making direct contact with the skin, such as when you are doing the dishes or cleaning the bath. In these cases your hands come into direct contact with the active product, and the active ingredients needed to remove the grease or dirt will have an effect on your skin. A good example of where Ecover makes a difference is through making cleaning products that are Ph neutral (link Ph explanation) and that use eco-surfactants, developed by us, without any compromise on performance.

Indirect contact exposure: The clothes you are wearing contain traces of washing detergents and fabric softener. This is an example of indirect contact exposure between your skin and the active product. Skin allergies have grown exponentially over the last years and are often related to laundry products. Perfumes and the increased levels of exposure to perfumes in our daily lives are also significant (for more info on allergies, see link). As well as being heavily perfumed, conventional laundry products contain optical brighteners. None of the studies on optical brighteners are fully conclusive about the effect they have on skin, but as it is proven that there is a transfer of petrochemical compounds from the clothes to our bodies, we prefer to choose the safest option.

Inhaling exposure: We’ve probably all experienced the effect of a heavily chlorinated product on our breathing, either when using a product at home or when visiting a freshly cleaned public toilet. It sparks an intuitive sense of it not being healthy. In many cases, however, the effects of bad air quality are far less noticeable. Air quality has a huge impact on one’s health and one of the main factors influencing the internal air quality of your home is your choice of cleaning products. Volatile organic substances (VOC’s) that exist in cleaning products, especially in air fresheners, are released during their use and form bonds with other chemicals in the air.

Because there have been so many nasty surprises with chemicals in the past, it is easy to get worked up about the health aspects of any kind of chemical. In this context, chemicals that have been proven to be perfectly safe in the context of their application (see SLS, essential oils,…) have been the victim of chemical bashing: where a group of people attack a specific chemical for its toxic properties and campaign for it to be banned. As much as we encourage consumers and experts to critically screen all products and chemicals, we should be careful with sudden orchestrated controversies around one specific ingredient. We believe in always looking at the scientific consensus, and where no evidence or toxicology data exists we use the precaution principle to be on the safe side.

**Mental wellbeing (reconnect):** At Ecover we aim to make people Feel Good. We want to provide solutions that are worry free, that don’t force people to choose between performance and ecology, and to entertain and provide a little bit of fun through our communications. On a deeper level, we believe that as humans we have a need to feel connected to our environment and nature, working in harmony with it rather than against it. We don’t claim to be treehuggers; it’s not about going back in time and living in the woods. On the contrary, we try to understand the science behind nature in a modern way to improve quality of life as a whole. By using ever improving technology, we make products that work and connect people back to the power of nature.

**Social wellbeing:** Choosing one cleaning product over another isn’t likely to impact your personal relationships or standing in society. But as a company, we do have a role to play in the social wellbeing of the people who work for us, whether directly or indirectly.

As a game changer in the industry, within our own organization we believe we can inspire people to make a difference on an individual level. We want people to feel good about working for or with us, as we realize job satisfaction has a major impact on social wellbeing. (more info, read ‘people focus’ link)

We can spread our influence further by asking for specific guarantees from our suppliers about the social conditions of their workers. However a lot of work still needs to be done about the transparency throughout our supply chain. More info on our sustainable sourcing, see link.

To conclude, health is a central theme in Ecover’s mission and we are committed to giving it the broad attention it needs. This means we put the precaution principle at the forefront when developing our products, allowing only safe ingredients for both people and the planet, even if they are only present in very low dosages. The second principle that is part of our health guarantee towards consumers is the Best Available Technique (BAT): if there is a safer alternative that does the job, why not use it? As well as having a responsibility to physical well being, what we do as a company can have a positive impact on mental and social health, and we are committed to taking all these factors into account as we move into the future.

**Short company statement**

Ecover’s mission is to make a healthy and sustainable lifestyle easy. We see health and sustainability as being firmly entwined, both on a grand scale as in the state of the planet, and on a day-to-day level as in the choices we offer with our products. As a company, we are committed to making products that are better for our customers’ wellbeing, continually looking for the safest natural ingredients and always erring on the side of caution. We continue to use and search out new solutions that work with nature, rather than against it, for the health and happiness of future generations and our precious planet.