

Avoiding Quats (ammonium quaternary compounds) and Finding Safer Alternatives

How do you know a quat when you see one on a label?

Quaternary ammonium compounds are a class of chemicals that have numerous names and synonyms. They are often an “active ingredient” in disinfectant cleaners. Law requires antibacterial (disinfectant) products list their active ingredients on their front label.

Commonly found quats in household products usually include “...**onium chloride**” in their names. Examples of commonly found quats are:

- Benzalkonium chloride
- Benzethonium chloride
- Alkyl dimethyl benzyl ammonium chlorides (C12-16)
- Alkyl dimethyl benzyl ammonium chloride (C14 60%, C16 30%, C12 5%, C18 5%)
- Alkyl dimethyl ethylbenzyl ammonium chloride (C12-14)
- Alkyl dimethyl ethylbenzyl ammonium chlorides (C12-18)
- Didecyldimethylammonium chloride
- Dioctyldimethylammonium chloride

QUATS AND YOUR HEALTH

Quats are skin irritants, can irritate your lungs, and have been linked to asthma, fertility issues, and reproductive harm. The overuse of quats can also lead to the promotion of antibacterial-resistant bacteria (“superbugs”).

Finding Safer Alternatives

Giving up the use of cleaners with quats doesn’t mean having dirtier spaces. There are numerous effective, inexpensive and commonly used non-antibacterial cleaners which can make places spotless. If you choose to use a disinfectant for a specific need – look for **safer cleaners** that do not contain quats, including those with active ingredients such as **hydrogen peroxide, lactic acid or thymol**. Or consider simply using **vinegar**, or non-disinfectant wipes (like **baby wipes**) which are equally convenient for cleaning up small messes, and wiping off surfaces quickly.

Here are links to finding safer institutional cleaning products:

- U.S. EPA Safer Choice: <https://www.epa.gov/saferchoice/products>
- U.S EPA Design for the Environment Safer Disinfectants: https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-labels/design-environment-antimicrobial-pesticide-pilot-project-moving-toward-green-end#authorized_dfe
- SF Approved (City of San Francisco): <https://www.sfapproved.org/cleaners> and <https://www.sfapproved.org/disinfectants>
- Safer Products and Practices for Disinfecting Surfaces (SF Environment): <https://sfenvironment.org/download/safer-products-and-practices-for-disinfecting-surfaces>