

Making Homemade Soaps

Soapmaking can be a creative and rewarding hobby as long as the proper safety precautions are followed. One of the biggest aspects of this means learning about lye and other safety procedures, and this should be done before even bothering to attempt to research how the soapmaking process works. Sometimes even experienced soapmakers need to be reminded!

Don't let this all scare you- making soap can be as safe of a craft as any other! However, the key to safety means being informed. Here's some guidelines and tips:

GET TO KNOW LYE AND RESPECT IT!!!

Soap CANNOT be made without lye. There's no way around it and if someone told you they did, I hate to break it to you- they lied. Even liquid soap, bath gels, and shampoos contain a form of lye called potassium hydroxide. However lye, alone, is a highly dangerous substance. There's no sugar coating it- lye can kill you. If you respect it and use it properly everything will be fine. Try not develop a fear of it, and instead focus on handling it properly.

Label your lye water.

If lye is ingested internally, there is a strong likelihood of it being fatal. If you walked away for even for less than a minute and someone walked into your kitchen with a bowl of lye water in a glass, bowl, or pitcher- the results could be deadly! Just to be safe I like to mark my bowl or pitcher with large adhesive label or even better yet, a permanent marker.

Wear your goggles or safety glasses.

Always! If lye water splashes into your eyes, it can blind you. It doesn't take much... Better to be safe than sorry!

Wear your gloves.... And your clothes!

If it can do that to your eyes, exposed skin isn't safer either! Lye can eat through skin. Even in tiny amounts it can cause painfully irritating chemical burns. It's wise to keep a bottle of vinegar around in case of splashes or spills. If this should occur, rinsing with vinegar helps to neutralize the lye. However, care should be taken to prevent this because the vinegar cannot undo damage that has already been done! Even finished soap bars can be irritating until soap has it's "curing" time- usually a very minimum of four weeks. When making soap, it's smart to make sure you're wearing clothes that will protect your skin. Pants, instead of shorts or dresses, and long sleeves are ideal. Don't forget your feet- remember your shoes!

Keep pets and children away while soapmaking.

It doesn't take much for lye to be harmful to anyone- it takes even less to bring harm to a small child or pet. If you have little ones running around, it's best to do your soapmaking in an area they don't have access to or wait until you have "alone time". Even with ground rules and with the best behaved children or pets in the world, it's just not worth the risk.

Only use pure lye.

NEVER attempt to use Draino or any other products that "contain" lye. These products contain other chemical additives that may interfere with the soapmaking process. The results could range from winding up with a soap that is highly irritant to the skin to a lethal concoction that you wouldn't even want to be in the same room with!

Work in a well ventilated area.

The fumes that rise when lye is mixed with water during the first few minutes can irritate the lungs. Some people are

more sensitive to it than others, but a well ventilated area is recommended to anyone. Remember even if it doesn't bother you at the moment, repeated exposure may bring about a different story. Larger batches of soap are usually give off more potent fumes than smaller ones.

Use an accurate scale.

Never measure your ingredients by volume because it can lead to inaccuracies, leaving you with an irritating "lye heavy" soap. Instead, make sure you use an accurate scale to weigh out your ingredients- one that measures in increments of at least a 10th of an ounce is best. A good postal scale will do just fine. It's also a good idea to invest in calibration weights for your scale so that you can test it's accuracy periodically.

Use the right equipment.

Choose your bowls, pitchers, spoons, or whatever will come in contact with your raw soap carefully. Ideally, you want to make sure your supplies aren't going to be used again for cooking, for an example. You also have to keep in mind that certain metals such as aluminum or copper can have undesired chemical reactions with lye. The best materials to use are stainless steel and heavy duty dishwasher safe plastics. (Even wooden spoons will do, though the lye water will slowly eat at them over time. I lost a good spoon that way!) Some people even recommend using large glass Pyrex measuring cups. However, I personally can't. I have heard of rare instances where even sturdy Pyrex glass has shattered- in one case I heard of, no one was even in the same room when it happened! In a way it makes sense. Lye water, when first mixed, can reach very high temperatures in an absurdly small amount of time. Then on top of it, over time the potent lye itself may do it's damage. Over time it may make the glass brittle and create stress on it, though unseen to the human eye.

Use distilled water instead of tap.

Some people say it's alright to use regular tap water for soapmaking. In most cases, it probably is fine... However tap water can contain various trace metals and minerals that may interact with your lye, giving some unexpected results in your finished soaps. Once again, much better to be safer than sorry!

Mind your pour!

Always make sure to close the container of lye tightly when you're done. Any moisture that gets in contact with the lye granules will form clumps, which may increase the chance of spills while pouring next time you use it. It may even effect your soap by giving you inaccurate weighings of your ingredients in the end, if enough gets in there. Pouring slowly so you get it right the first shot and don't have to put any back is also wise. Another thing that can be a hassle sometimes when pouring to weigh your lye is static... Lye sometimes gets a "charge" and granules here and there seem to have a mind of their own when being poured! A quick wiping of the container you'll be weighing with a dryer sheet first helps with a smoother pour.

Always use a lye calculator- no matter what.

Never assume a recipe that someone gives you, that you find online, or come across in a book is safe. Even if you obtain a recipe from the world's most trustworthy source, it is always safer to run your recipe through a lye calculator first to make sure you use the proper amount of your ingredients. There are many free and easy to use lye calculators that can be used online or downloaded to your computer, so there's no excuses!

Stay away from painted surfaces.

It's best not to do your soapmaking on any painted surfaces. Lye can easily strip paint and damage surfaces. Even on kitchen counters made with a tougher surface material, it's a good idea to lay down some plastic or freezer paper to protect the area you're working in. Remember to always keep that vinegar handy as well, just in case!

I know this all must sound terrifying to some and makes you feel as if you need a Hazmat team on standby when learning how to make soap, but believe me it's not really as bad as it sounds! More people than you'd probably imagine throughout the world make soap every day. If you're interested in soapcrafting, just do as much research on the subject as possible from as many different sources as you can. There are also several wonderful forums for soapmakers where people can turn to others for advice and to share experiences and ideas. Soapmaking may not be for everyone, but chances are once you make your first successful batch , you'll be hooked on this craft! Just remember- at any stage in this wonderful hobby, safety always comes first!

You can visit Lisa Chambers' website at chambersessentials.com for free information, recipes, and tips based on natural or crafty point of views.