

# Local woman nearly killed after mixing cleaners

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Staff Writer

A Terra Cotta woman who recently had a near-fatal accident with household cleaning agents wants to share her story with the public in order to hopefully prevent a similar incident from happening to someone else.

Laura Fiander, 50, was cleaning the upstairs bathroom of her rural residence near the Terra Cotta Conservation Area around 2 p.m. on July 8, while husband Mike Witt was outside painting. A quiet day of doing chores around the house soon turned into a nightmare that nearly resulted in Fiander's death and sent her to hospital for several days.

"I had a shower and then I decided to clean the tub afterward and I noticed some hard-water deposits on the shower mat that looked like mildew, and I dumped some Javex in the tub and let the water run," said Fiander, her voice still breaking from damage to her larynx. "Then I noticed some deposits on the shower curtain, so I got a spray bottle with CLR and sprayed it. All of a sudden there was a hissing sound and the fumes overwhelmed me. It felt like a blow torch was instantly going down my throat."

Fiander was able to make it to the front of the house before collapsing to alert Witt to the situation, but by this time she was foaming at the mouth and gasping for air as her esophagus was swelling shut. The only word she was able to blurt out was "chemicals." After several minutes of trying to resuscitate her, Witt called 911 when her eyes and skin turned a ghostly blue colour.

"I kept hoping that with some fresh air she might catch her breath, but she went into convulsions, gagging intensely, and twice I was able to revive her, but there was nothing I could do. It was horrifying," he said. "It's amazing she's still with us. We're fortunate that an ambulance was just 10 minutes away in Caledon, and the two female paramedics did a fantastic job."

After being stabilized at Georgetown Hospital,

Fiander would remain there for another five days as doctors flushed the toxins out of her body. Her lungs were literally burned, and it may take several years for them to return to normal, and she has been basically confined to her home because of the susceptibility of contracting an illness or developing an infection. Fiander uses a puffer six times a day to help her collapsed lungs expand to their former size and faces a lengthy recovery period with several more trips to see specialists.

"I'm not sure of the exact contents of the CLR, but I'm guessing it contains ammonia, and when that is mixed together with bleach it gives off a noxious gas, a form of chlorine gas," said Emmanuel Adianas, a spokesperson for Colgate-Palmolive Products Ltd. "We strongly recommend not to mix Javex with any products, period...As far as I am aware, this is not a common occurrence, but it certainly can happen."

Witt, who operates a freight-forwarding business out of the couple's home, would like to see changes in the labeling of such potentially deadly household cleaners that would more effectively alert consumers of their danger.

"I've spoken to literally hundreds of people since this happened, and yes they do know of the danger from these chemicals, but most don't know it's fatal, and that should be played up more in the packaging," he added. "These things should be locked up in cupboards like prescription drugs, or at least have a better labeling system. There needs to be better public awareness, especially in households with children."

Fiander is also circulating a letter, which tells her frightening story and warns of the deadly dangers of household cleaners.

"I was told that this chlorine gas is similar to mustard gas that was used in the First World War," Fiander said. "My throat literally closed up. What a horrid way to die. Who would ever think that just a quick whiff like that could kill you?"

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Laura Fiander is recovering at her Terra Cotta home with husband Mike Witt after a terrifying reaction to toxic substances while cleaning the couple's bathroom earlier this month. Previously unaware of the potentially fatal consequences of mixing household cleaners such as CLR and Javex, Fiander is publicizing her experience to prevent another person from falling victim to a similar incident. Photo by Eamonn Maher

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