



# Glossary

## More About Making a Difference

- Biodegradable:** A biodegradable substance or material can be broken down into its fundamental parts by exposure to the natural action of microorganisms, sunlight, and/or water. A substance is defined as “Readily Biodegradable” if 60% of the substance degrades within 28 days under defined test conditions.
- Biomimicry:** Biomimicry is a new discipline that takes nature’s designs and processes and applies them to solve human problems. The core idea is that nature has already solved many of the problems we are struggling with. An example of biomimicry is studying a leaf to invent a better solar cell (see [www.biomimicry.net](http://www.biomimicry.net)).
- Bionutrients:** Bionutrients are any materials that are inputs to a biological process. Foods, vitamins, and minerals are examples of bionutrients.
- Climate change:** On average, global temperatures are increasing in much of the world, leading to changes in the Earth’s climate. The causes of this change are not completely understood, but many scientists have concluded that at least one major reason is the accumulation of manmade greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide and methane) in the atmosphere (the “greenhouse effect.”).
- Cradle-to-cradle:** Cradle-to-cradle is a strategy to make products that can be used, recycled, and used again without losing any material quality. This approach to product design eliminates waste and saves energy. Cradle-to-cradle design is based on observation of nature, where every “waste” material is the starting material for another process.
- Non-toxic:** Non-toxic substances are not harmful or destructive to human health. At some level, every substance is toxic. Therefore the toxicity must be evaluated in terms of quantity of material. The less of a substance that is needed to cause harm, the greater is the toxicity of the substance. The term “non-toxic” is not legally defined, and it is used indiscriminately in the marketplace. Seventh Generation uses the definition of “non-toxic” defined by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).  
According to the CPSC, “acutely toxic” means any substance that produces death within 14 days in half or more than half of a group of white rats when a single dose of from 50mg to 5 grams per kg of body weight is administered orally.  
A substance is defined by the CPSC as “chronically toxic” if it is a known or probable human carcinogen, neurotoxin, developmental or reproductive toxicant.
- Optical brighteners:** Optical brighteners are synthetic chemicals that are often added to laundry detergents to make clothes seem brighter or whiter. They coat clothes with fluorescent particles that convert ultraviolet light to visible light. When the light is reflected outward, clothes appear cleaner than they really are.
- Phosphates:** Phosphates are natural minerals used in automatic dishwasher detergents to increase effectiveness by removing hard water minerals and preventing dirt from re-depositing on dishes during washing. Most major laundry detergent manufacturers stopped using phosphates in 1993.
- Solvents:** Solvents are used to dissolve or disperse other materials, especially oils. Often called degreasers, solvents are used in consumer products to keep other ingredients suspended or dispersed in the product, or as an ingredient to dissolve heavy deposits of oil or grease.
- Surfactants:** Surfactants are substances that help oil and grease mix with water. Surfactants may be synthetic detergents or made from vegetable oils, like soap. They are molecules with two ends that form a “bridge” between the water doing the cleaning and the grease and dirt being cleaned.
- Sustainability:** Sustainability is the capacity of a process or entity to maintain itself indefinitely. Sustainable development can be defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (see [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)).
- Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs):** VOCs are carbon-based chemicals that can form vapors at room temperature. VOCs, including most common solvents, are easily evaporated into our homes’ air and come from two predominant sources; 1. synthetic materials like particleboard, foams and plastics, that are made with VOCs, and 2. the use of household products that contain VOCs as ingredients.