

Help Yourself to a Healthy Home **Indoor Air Quality**

SHOULD YOU BE CONCERNED?

Most people spend at least half of their lives inside their homes. The air inside can be more harmful to your family's health than the air outdoors. Is the air in your home safe to breathe?

It is not always easy to tell if your home has poor air quality. You may notice bad smells or see smoke, but you cannot see or smell other dangers, like carbon monoxide or radon. This factsheet and those on asthma and allergies, mold, and carbon monoxide will help you ask the right questions to find out if the air inside your home is healthy and safe. They will also give you ideas about how to fix any problems you might find.

The air in your home can be unhealthy if it has too many pollutants in it. To cut down on indoor air pollution, learn where it comes from. Take good care of your home to keep it healthy!

Children can spend up to 90% of their time indoors. For their size, children breathe up to twice as much air as adults. That means children are at greater risk for health problems that come from indoor air pollution.

Asthma and Allergies

If someone in your home has health problems or is ill, polluted indoor air can make them feel worse. For example, asthma is a lung disease that affects a growing number of children. Indoor air pollution can make it worse. Insects and other pests can also be a real problem for people with asthma or allergies. For example, cockroach and dust mite droppings cause asthma attacks in some people. Pesticides can help fight these pests, but they are dangerous. See the factsheet "Help Yourself to a Healthy Home—Pesticides" for more information about using bug spray and other pesticides safely. See the factsheet "Help Yourself to a Healthy Home—Asthma and Allergies" to find out about making your home healthier for people with asthma or allergies.

Mold

Mold grows in wet or damp places. It often smells musty. Many people are allergic to mold. Some kinds of mold are toxic, and coming into contact with large amounts of mold may cause health problems. Talk to a doctor if you think mold is causing health problems for your or your family. See the factsheet "Help Yourself to a Healthy Home—Mold and Moisture" to learn more about how to control mold in your house.

Carbon Monoxide

Carbon monoxide is a deadly gas that can come from appliances that burn gas, oil, coal, or wood, and are not working as they should. Car exhaust also has carbon monoxide. You cannot see, taste, or smell carbon monoxide. See the factsheet “ Help Yourself to a Healthy Home—Carbon Monoxide” for more information on how to protect your family from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Other Indoor Air Problems

Radon is another gas. It can get into some homes from the ground below them. You cannot see, taste, or smell radon. Radon is found all over the United States. Radon can cause lung cancer. In fact, it is the second leading cause of lung cancer in the U.S. If you smoke and your home has high levels of radon, your risk of lung cancer is especially high.

Sometimes indoor air pollution comes from what people do in their home.

- Tobacco smoking causes cancer and other major health problems. It’s unsafe for children to be around smokers. ***Second-hand*** or ***environmental tobacco smoke*** can raise children’s risk of ear infections and breathing problems. It can trigger asthma attacks, too.
- Many families have pets. However, furry pets cause problems for some people. Pets can make asthma and allergies act up, especially if you keep them in sleeping areas.
- Hobbies and home projects sometimes involve sanding, painting, welding, or using ***solvent chemicals***, like varnish or paint strippers. (A solvent is a chemical that can dissolve something else. Solvents are usually liquid.) Home projects can pollute the air with dust or harmful chemicals.

Sometimes indoor air pollution comes from what people have in their homes.

- Some household products, especially those with solvents, can pollute the air if you don’t use them in the right way.
- New furniture, carpets, and building products may give off chemicals that were used in their making. Some of these chemicals can harm people, especially children.
- If your home was built before 1978, the paint may have lead in it. Lead is very dangerous for young children. See the factsheets on testing, fixing , and cleaning lead hazards to learn more about protecting your children from lead poisoning.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

There are simple but important steps you can take to find out what is causing poor air quality. The following questions can help you find problems around your home.

Your Family's Health

- Does anyone in your family have asthma or allergies?
- Does a family member notice burning eyes, coughing, or sneezing that happens most often while at home?
- Does anyone in your home have chronic bronchitis or another lung disease?

Radon

- Have you ever tested your home for radon?
- Do any of your neighbors have problems with radon gas? If so, you might also have a radon problem.

Living in a Healthy Home

- Do some areas in your home smell damp or musty?
- Have you seen cockroaches in your home?
- Do you know how to safely run and take care of your fuel-burning appliances?
- Do you allow smoking in your home?
- Do you have furry pets in your home? In the bedrooms?
- Do you read the label on household products, and follow the directions for using them safely?
- Do you open windows or turn on fans when doing hobbies or projects that make dust or odors?
- Do you try to do dusty or smelly projects outdoors?
- Do you choose furniture, carpet, and building products that are made with non-toxic chemicals and materials? These are sometimes called **green building products**.
- Does your home ever smell musty, damp, smoky, or like chemicals?
- Does your home seem stuffy or stale? Can you smell cooking odors the next day?
- Do your bathroom and kitchen have exhaust fans—do you use them?

ACTION STEPS

Be sure to also check the Action Steps in the factsheets on asthma and allergies, mold, and carbon monoxide. You will find good suggestions for cutting down on pollution in your home and making the air healthier.

Test Your Home for Radon

- You can buy low-cost radon test kits at hardware or home supply stores. Or call your local or state health department for more information.

Living in a Healthy Home

- Do not smoke in your home or car. **Never** smoke near your children.
- Pay attention to housekeeping. Taking care of food and spills right away keeps bugs and pests away. A clean home is a healthier home.
- Open windows or use fans to let in fresh air whenever someone uses chemicals in the home or garage.
- Ask the salesperson to unroll new carpet and let it air out for at least one day before bringing it into your home. Put in carpet during a season when you can open windows for several days afterwards. Vacuum old carpet well before you remove it to keep down dust.
- Let new furniture and building materials air out for a few days before bringing them inside. Before buying new things for your home, ask for products made with non-toxic chemicals and materials. Sometimes non-toxic or green building products cost more money. You need to decide if the cost is worth it to protect the health of your family.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- US Environmental Protection Agency Indoor Air Quality Home Page—www.epa.gov/iaq
- Indoor Air Quality Information Clearinghouse (IAQ INFO) 800/438-4318 (Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time) or email: iaqinfo@aol.com
- National Radon Information Hotline 800/SOS RADON (800/767-7236)
- The National Consumer Federation’s Radon Website—www.radonfixit.org
- National Lead Information Center 800/ LEAD-INFO (800/532-3394)
- National Hispanic Indoor Air Quality Hotline 800/SALUD-12 (800/725-8312), Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. Eastern Time
- American Lung Association. Contact your local organization, call 800/LUNG-USA (800/586-4872) or visit the web at www.lungusa.org
- Contact Healthy Indoor Air for America’s Homes at 406/994-3451 or www.healthyindoorair.org
- For information on green building materials, contact The Healthy House Institute at www.hhinst.com or 812/332-5073
- *Home*A*Syst*: An Environmental Risk Assessment Guide for the Home contains information about indoor air quality and other healthy home topics. 608/262-0024 or www.uwex.edu/homeasyst

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