



Wellness News Network™

Your Source for Health & Wellness Information

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Is Your House Making You Sick?

Presented by:

Introduction

Do you have a sick house? Lead paint, pesticides, and pollution can contribute to sick house syndrome. Here are 10 things you can do to keep your house, and you, healthy.

Is your house making you sick? Don't be surprised if the answer is yes. Toxins, pesticides, gases, mites, and molds are everywhere, and the more you're exposed to them, the greater your risk for developing the health problems they can cause.

When it comes to being "home sick," says Robert McLellan, MD, director of Exeter Hospital's Environmental and Occupational Health Center in Portsmouth, N.H., you can look at it from two angles. Which of your health problems are related to your environment? Or what hazards are lurking in your environment and what can they do to you?

The first angle, typically referred to as "sick building syndrome," usually results in a group of symptoms such as eye, nose, and throat irritation, stuffiness, "spaciness," and rash, says McLellan. "These symptoms come and go fairly quickly -- you may notice them within an hour or two of entering a building but also notice that they will be gone within an hour or two of leaving a building." There is no objective test that measures these symptoms, McLellan says, so it's more a matter of paying attention to the symptoms and trying to pinpoint when

you have them and where you are when they strike.

"Building-associated illness" covers the second angle. In this case, the effects of environmental hazards may not be immediately apparent. Exposure to radon, for example, can lead to lung cancer, but it may be years before that happens. With building-associated illness, abnormalities -- such as sinusitis, allergies, asthma -- can be diagnosed through objective tests.

Every household is different, says Elizabeth Sword, executive director of the Children's Health Environmental Coalition (CHEC), in Princeton, N.J., but we should all look to the same general sources when trying to determine what hazards we're facing. Air, food, water, and consumer products are what Sword calls the "organizing principles" of confronting environmental risks.

Falling under those headings are "8 environmental hazards you can live without," says McLellan:

1.) Tobacco smoke. Long-term exposure to other people's tobacco smoke (not to mention your own!) increases your risk for lung cancer, respiratory infections, other lung problems, and possibly heart disease. Don't allow tobacco smoke in your home, McLellan cautions.

QUESTION:

Most homes built before _____ have lead paint

- A) 1958
- B) 1968
- C) 1978
- D) 1988

ANSWER:

C) 1978

QUESTION:

TRUE OR FALSE:

Lumber may be treated with arsenic

ANSWER:

True

QUESTION:

VOC stands for...

- A) Volatile organic compound
- B) Volatile oxygen compound
- C) Violent oxygen compound
- D) Viscous organic compound

Answer:

A) Volatile organic compound

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2.) Radon. Radon is an odorless, invisible gas that can increase the risk of lung cancer, especially for smokers. Radon tests are not expensive. For more information, call the National Radon Hotline at (800) SOS-RADON.

3.) Asbestos . If your home was built between 1920 and 1978, you may be exposed to asbestos, which was commonly used as a building and insulation material then. Exposure to small amounts of asbestos probably won't harm you, but breathing high levels of it can increase your risk of cancer and lung disease. Only specially trained and licensed contractors should remove asbestos, but you can identify it yourself. For more information, call the Consumer Product Safety Commission at (800) 638-CPSC, or visit the EPA's web site at www.epa.gov/opptintr/asbestos/ashome.htm#4.

4.) Lead. Many homes built in the U.S. before 1978 contain lead paint, which causes lead poisoning in nearly 900,000 American children each year. If you have a young child at home who is at risk for lead exposure, talk to your physician about having the child's blood tested for lead levels. And if you live in an older home, consider testing for lead paint. For more information, call the National Lead Information Center at (800) 424-LEAD, or visit the EPA's web site at www.epa.gov/lead/leadpbed.htm.

Another, more contemporary, risk of lead poisoning comes from scented candles. According to the Environmental Illness Society of Canada, some candle makers are still using lead cores in their wicks, which can result in lead particles being emitted into the air of a home. This is particularly dangerous for infants, small children, and pregnant women.

5.) Combustion gases. These gases include carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and sulfur dioxide. They can

cause flu-like symptoms, respiratory illnesses, or even death. Don't use unvented combustion appliances (such as portable kerosene heaters) indoors. Use an exhaust hood over a gas stove. Clean and maintain your chimneys and furnace every year, making sure that they are properly vented. And install a carbon monoxide monitor.

6.) Water pollution. The U.S. has one of the safest water supplies in the world, but that doesn't mean it's failsafe. To check the water quality in your area, call the EPA's Drinking Water Hotline at (800) 246-4791, or visit the web site at www.epa.gov/safewater/dwhealth.html. If you use a private well, test your water every year for nitrates and bacteria. Depending on where you live, you may also want to test for pesticides, organic chemicals, or radon.

7.) Household chemicals. Some household products may be dangerous if not used correctly. Choose the least dangerous chemical for the job. Keep household chemicals away from children and pets, and if possible, store them outside the house and away from living spaces.

8.) Pesticides. Try to avoid using chemical pesticides when maintaining your gardens, lawns, and trees. You can get advice from www.epa.gov/oppead1/Publications/lawncare.pdf. Also, store firewood outside and away from the house to avoid insects, keep food in tight containers, and clean up food spills to minimize insects.

Though we may be at higher risk for environmental-related conditions and illnesses than ever before, the good news, says McLellan, is that from a preventive standpoint, much can be done. "If we build, design, and operate our homes in a healthy manner, we can keep a lot of these problems from getting out of hand."

Quote to Inspire

"Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity"

Hippocrates



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