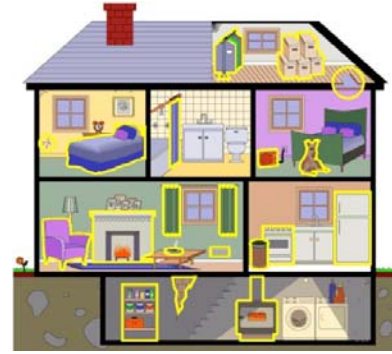


Improving the Air We Breathe *Indoors*

It's the little things that count

Naturally, we spend more time in our homes as cool fall days give way to winter. What can be *unnatural* – and possibly unhealthy – is the air we breathe indoors.

Indoor air quality (IAQ) can be plagued by substances and organisms that pose health risks. Radon, carbon monoxide, and tobacco smoke often make the news as major contributors to poor IAQ. Other culprits include volatile organic compounds in household air freshening and cleaning products, mold, faulty ventilation, and moisture buildup.



People who want to improve the situation may feel overwhelmed about where and how to begin, given the seemingly bewildering array of airborne risks. However, little steps can make a big difference in promoting healthier air.

“Start small,” says Laura Shumpert, supervisor of the Asbestos/Indoor Air Quality Unit for the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment in Denver.

“Don’t smoke in the house, if at all,” Shumpert says. “The next time you go to the store, choose cleaning or other products that are less toxic, or clean without chemicals.”

While it can be challenging to find legitimately nontoxic products just by browsing store shelves, [Grist magazine](#), [Eartheasy](#), and [Eco-Cycle](#), for example, offer reviews of IAQ-friendly products and recipes for cleaning without harmful chemicals.

Other helpful IAQ improvement measures include checking for radon (testing kits are often available at little or no cost from public health departments), inspecting for uncontrolled moisture and pests, changing furnace filters as recommended and possibly upgrading filtration levels, and obtaining a carbon monoxide monitor.

“Bigger issues such as inspecting for asbestos should be done when needed, before renovation work disturbs suspect material,” says Shumpert. “Many IAQ fixes can be low or no cost.”



Even something as simple as [opening a window five minutes each day](#) and [adding houseplants](#) can improve IAQ, according to Healthy Child Healthy World.

Shumpert says to be wary of air-cleaning products that sound a little too good to be true.

“There is a lot of misleading information out there,” she says, “and the lack of regulatory guidance on many IAQ issues can leave people feeling confused or vulnerable. Someone offering to sell you a machine or product to ‘clean’ your air is not the way to go.”

When in doubt about product claims, Shumpert recommends contacting public health departments for clarification. Mold is a prime example.

“The most persistent piece of misinformation we hear is the term ‘black mold’ or ‘toxic black mold,’” says Shumpert. “There has been a lot of media attention on mold, some of it very sensationalized and not at all accurate.”

Finding mold in a home is usually not cause for panic, she says, because fungi, which include molds and yeasts, are found most everywhere in the air and on many surfaces in a home.

Shumpert explains that mold needs two things to grow and reproduce: a source of food and a source of moisture. Since many building materials are a natural food source for mold, the easiest way to control and prevent mold is to control moisture. Most molds are aero-allergenic, which means they can cause or exacerbate allergies or asthma. However, many of the health effects attributed to mold have not been scientifically validated.

Testing for mold is usually not recommended because of the difficulty and expense involved, says Shumpert. In addition, there is no established regulatory airborne fungal level against which to benchmark test results.

Instead, she says, “if you see or smell mold, find and control the source of moisture and clean the affected area.”

Shumpert recommends consulting the [EPA’s mold website](#) for guidance.

Other helpful IAQ websites include:

<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/iaqhouse.html>

<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/insidestory.html>

<http://www.lungusa.org/healthy-air/home/resources/keep-pollution-out-of-your-home.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyhomes/bytopic/airquality.html>

<http://www.cdphe.state.co.us/ap/iaqhom.html>

http://healthychild.org/blog/comments/healthier_indoor_air/

<http://women.webmd.com/home-health-and-safety-9/indoor-air>

“Making a commitment to improving indoor air quality will pay off the same as any other commitment to healthy living issues, such as eating right and exercising,” says Shumpert. “You’ll potentially have less sick time and fewer visits to the doctor or hospital. Plus, a cleaner home can be a motivator.”