

How To Test Your Home for Harmful Substances

By Debbie Johnson

Danger may be lurking in your home. In fact, millions of homes have some kind of environmental hazard lurking inside them ranging from minor allergens to carcinogens. If one or more family members are exhibiting the slightest of recurring symptoms, your house should be tested.

The American Lung Association (ALA) reports that those who are most susceptible to hazardous substances in the home are the ones who spend the most time at home: children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with lung disease. The ALA further warns that most contaminating substances give no warning of their presence and produce vague symptoms that are hard to pin down to a specific cause.

Over the years, several indoor air pollutants have been identified and tests have been established that allow residents to test their own homes for these dangerous substances. Check with your local health department to test for such substances. Also, if you've been subject to any of the symptoms described below, see your family physician.

Below is a list of many common home pollutants:

- **Molds:** Found in soil, on dead plants and on food, there are over 250,000 types of molds. Mold is often identified as a white or colored furry fungus on surfaces. Health problems that have been associated with mold are allergies, a chronic cold, conjunctivitis, asthma, sneezing attacks, exacerbated eczema, red eyes, and shortness of breath. Possible sources of mold include wallpaper, glue, books, leather objects, food and wooden objects. Mold grows best in poorly ventilated areas.
- **Pesticides:** Domestic pesticides are used in products aimed at ridding the home of a variety of pests. Other possible sources of domestic pesticides are wood surfaces that have been treated with modern wood preservatives and carpets treated with pesticides. Some pesticides can damage the central nervous system. For not-so-serious pest problems, non-toxic detergents or mechanical controls are a better choice than pesticides.
- **Ozone:** This is found in summertime smog and in polluted outdoor air. However, it can also be a problem inside the house. Some sources of ozone are ultraviolet lamps, laser printers and photocopiers. Overexposure to high levels of ozone can cause damage to

the immune system and have adverse effects on lung function, especially during physical exertion.

- **Organic solvents:** This term describes a wide range of potentially volatile substances. Once the odor is inhaled, it is spread through the lungs and nervous system. Exposure to these solvents may cause allergies, headaches, migraines, sleeping disorders, dizziness, shortness of breath, bronchitis, coughing and eczema. Possible sources of exposure to organic solvents are open fires, tobacco smoke, exhaust fumes, turpentine, paint and coatings, bath salts, bubble bath, correction fluid and nail polish remover.
- **Dust mites:** Incredibly, these tiny arachnids are found in every bed. They attach themselves to dust, freely move around the house and are easily inhaled. Once inhaled, allergens penetrate the mucous membranes. Possible adverse health effects include a constant cold, conjunctivitis, asthma, sneezing attacks, reddened eyes and shortness of breath. Dust mites can be found in mattresses, upholstered furniture and pillows. If it is determined that exposure to dust mites are the cause of health problems, you should thoroughly clean and remove dust traps and frequently wash and change bed linens.
- **Formaldehyde:** This colorless gas has a pungent smell and is a carcinogen. Exposure to formaldehyde provokes allergic sensitization and irritates mucous membranes. There is often a general feeling of ill health and airway disorders. To diminish the effects, remove all furniture containing formaldehyde and use formaldehyde-free disinfectants, varnishes, textiles and cosmetics. Wash textiles and materials before using them. Formaldehyde is found in chipboard, furniture, soft fiberboard, foams for door frame attachments, cavity and roof insulation, floor adhesives, carpets, parquet floor sealing and tobacco smoke.
- **Tobacco smoke:** With about 5,000 different chemicals, this pollutant can cause substantial health problems. The smoke is carcinogenic and has one hundred times the concentration for passive smokers. It can also cause vascular diseases, airway disorders, allergies, and osteoporosis.
- **Radon gas:** This radioactive substance is given off when soil or rock, with trace amounts of uranium or radium, decay. The gas seeps into a home through cracks in the foundation floor and walls, drains, sump pumps, joints and other openings. The United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that one out of every fifteen homes has been contaminated with radon. The gas is responsible for thousands of deaths each year and is the second-leading cause of lung cancer. A state-certified or EPA-qualified contractor can be hired to test for the gas. Home testing kits are also available.
- **Carbon monoxide:** This poisonous gas can kill easily. Because it is a colorless, odorless gas, its presence isn't always noticeable. It can cause fatigue, headache, confusion, nausea and dizziness. An alarm, similar to a smoke alarm, can be purchased and plugged into an electrical outlet. If levels are too high, the alarm goes off.

- **Asbestos:** A known carcinogen, this substance can be found in older homes. Check with your local health department for tests and removal procedures, as well as for the proper treatment for those who have come in contact with it.

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