

Sick-house syndrome: Symptoms and solutions

By JAMES AND MORRIS CAREY
The Associated Press

Many people are unaware that indoor air pollution can be just as bad as, or even worse than, outdoor air pollution to an individual's health.

EPA studies of human exposure to air pollutants indicate that indoor air levels of many pollutants may be two to five times, and occasionally, more than 100 times, higher than outdoor levels.

It's estimated that most people spend as much as 90 percent of their time indoors — making home, school and the workplace potentially hazardous to one's health. Health risks probably are higher for infants, the elderly and people with chronic dis-

eases.

Further, laws designed to improve energy efficiency by cutting down on drafts don't improve indoor air quality. Tightly sealed homes constructed in the last couple of decades might have diminished the use of fossil fuels, but have wreaked havoc with Americans' respiratory systems. Homes that can't "breathe" can't dilute pollutants contained in building and decorating products.

Indoor pollution sources that release gases or particles into the air are the primary cause of indoor air-quality problems. Inadequate ventilation can increase indoor pollutant levels by not bringing in enough outdoor air to dilute emissions from indoor sources, and by not carrying indoor air pollutants out of the home. This allows concentrations to build

up. High temperature and humidity levels also can increase concentrations of some pollutants.

All these pollutants have one thing in common; they contain chemicals that are part of a larger class of chemicals known as Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs). VOCs are organic (carbon-based) chemicals that evaporate readily at room temperature.

VOCs typically are found in high indoor concentrations in dry-cleaned clothing; chloroform from chlorinated water; benzene from tobacco smoke (one of the leading indoor air pollutants); formaldehyde from fabrics, pressed wood products and insulation; styrene found in adhesives, foam, lubricants, plastics carpets and insulation; methylene chloride from paint strippers; and carbon tetrachloride from paint removers.

Other potential sources of indoor air pollution are central heating, cooling and dehumidification systems, household cleaning and maintenance products, outdoor sources such as pesticides and biological contaminants such as animal dander, mold and cockroaches.

While indoor air pollution affects people differently, in general, short-term exposure might cause immediate effects such as headaches, dizziness and allergies. Long-term exposures can result in respiratory disease, heart disease and cancer, all of which can be severely debilitating, even fatal.

Building-related illness is an identifiable disease or illness that can be traced to a specific pollutant or source within a building. In contrast, the term "sick building (sick home) syndrome" is used to describe situations in which building occupants experience acute health and comfort effects that appear to be linked to time spent in a building, but where no specific illness or cause can be identified. Both syndromes are associated with acute or immediate health problems.

While this is not particularly good news, awareness is the first step in creating a more healthful indoor environment and improving your health. Your best defense against indoor air pollution is a strong offense.

First, identify and control sources of pollution to reduce and prevent indoor air contamination. This can range from changing housecleaning products to airing out freshly dry-cleaned clothing to tossing out formaldehyde-containing furniture. Equally important is improving ventilation. Proper ventilation — the mixing of indoor air with outdoor air — can revitalize the air in your home and protect your health.

Since cigarette smoke is one of the single greatest contributors to indoor air pollution, smoking indoors is a no-no. Similarly, fireplaces and other fuel-burning appliances (water heaters, furnaces, stoves, etc.) should be properly adjusted and vented to the exterior. Doing so will both pre-

Symptoms of a 'sick' house
Sick house symptoms include:
• Irritation of eyes, nose and throat
• Headaches
• Dizziness
• Fatigue
• Allergic reactions
• Asthma attacks
• Respiratory problems
• Skin irritation
• Nausea
• Difficulty breathing
• Increased hospital admissions
• Increased absenteeism from work
• Increased use of medical services

'Cure' your home from VOCs
Moisture
Air pollution can be caused by moisture. To reduce moisture, use dehumidifiers and air conditioning.

Mold
Mold can cause allergies and asthma. To reduce mold, use mold-resistant products and keep humidity low.

Radon
Radon is a naturally occurring gas that can cause lung cancer. To reduce radon, use radon-resistant materials and radon mitigation systems.

Carbon Monoxide
Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that can be fatal. To reduce carbon monoxide, use carbon monoxide detectors and proper ventilation.

Asbestos
Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that can cause lung cancer and mesothelioma. To reduce asbestos, use asbestos abatement procedures.

Lead
Lead is a toxic metal that can cause developmental delays in children. To reduce lead, use lead-free paint and lead-free solder.

Formaldehyde
Formaldehyde is a colorless, odorless gas that can cause irritation and cancer. To reduce formaldehyde, use formaldehyde-free products and proper ventilation.

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