Healthy Homes: Understanding Housing-Related Hazards

There is a growing awareness of the number of illnesses that can be caused by environmental risks in the home.

Everybody’s health is at risk from housing-related hazards, but infants, children, pregnant women, the elderly, and those with chronic medical conditions and disabilities are especially susceptible.

Knowledge of potential hazards in the home is important in the prevention and treatment of the medical conditions they can cause.

Home health hazards include dust, allergens, mold, and pests such as insects and rodents. They also include toxic materials such as lead, asbestos, and chemical pesticides, and poisonous gases such as carbon monoxide and radon. Since some of these hazards are odorless and colorless, they cannot be detected by the human senses alone. That’s why homeowners are encouraged to install detectors in their homes.

“Some environmental poisons can be invisible,” says Laura A. Saucer, program director of Nursing at South University — Montgomery. “You can’t see, taste, or smell radon or carbon monoxide, but both have deadly health effects.”

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), radon exposure is the number one cause of lung cancer among non-smokers. Radon is found in outdoor air and in the indoor air of buildings of all kinds, the EPA says. It comes from the natural decay of uranium that is found in nearly all soils. It typically moves up through the ground to the air above and into homes through cracks and other holes in the foundation. Any home can have a radon problem – new, old, well-sealed, or drafty, with or without basements.

Knowledge of potential hazards in the home is important in keeping individuals and families healthy.

There are many do-it-yourself radon test kits that can be purchased in hardware stores and retail outlets. Also, a qualified tester can be hired to do the testing. The state radon office should have a list of qualified testers.

Carbon monoxide, another silent killer, is found in combustion fumes, such as those produced by cars and trucks, small gasoline engines, stoves, lanterns, burning charcoal and wood, and gas ranges and heating systems, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission says that on average, about 170 people in the United States die every year from carbon monoxide produced by non-automotive consumer products.

“These are preventable deaths if people would practice a few safety precautions,” Saucer says.

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The most common symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are headaches, dizziness, weakness, nausea, vomiting, chest pain, and confusion. High levels of carbon monoxide inhalation can cause loss of consciousness and death.

The CDC lists guidelines to prevent carbon monoxide exposure, including having gas, oil, or coal-burning appliances serviced by a qualified technician and not burning anything in a stove or fireplace that is not vented. Most importantly, carbon monoxide detectors should be installed in the home.

In addition to poisonous gases, there are many other housing-related hazards that pose health risks. Mold and pests such as cockroaches, rodents, and dust mites, can cause and contribute to asthma, allergies, and other respiratory illnesses. Molds are microscopic organisms that can grow anywhere. The steps to controlling and removing mold should be taken carefully with special consideration given to protecting the hands, eyes, nose, and mouth.

Many home-dwellers have had to contend with insects and rodents. It might be difficult to get rid of the pesky creatures for good, but there are some proven ways to prevent them from taking over the home. The first step of pest control involves knowing what pest you are up against and then getting rid of the food
and water sources they are living on.

Meanwhile, cleanliness is key to minimizing dust in the home.

Toxic materials such as lead, asbestos, and pesticides can be very harmful, Saucer says. For example, lead poisoning can cause reduced IQ and attention span, hyperactivity, impaired growth, learning disabilities, and other intellectual and behavioral problems. Lead-based paint and lead-contaminated dust are the main sources of exposure for lead in children, according to the CDC.

Homeowners should talk with their state and local health departments about testing for lead in paint and dust in the home. Then, prevention methods should include housing maintenance to prevent hazards and remediation of existing hazards.

Asbestos fibers are known to cause respiratory illnesses including asbestosis, mesothelioma, and lung cancer. The fibers are commonly found in building construction materials that are used for insulation and as a fire-retardant. Laboratory testing is needed to determine if a material contains asbestos.

In general, if a material suspected of containing asbestos is in good condition, it should be left alone, says the National Center for Healthy Housing.

“A professional is needed to remove or repair asbestos-containing materials that are damaged or will be disturbed during a home improvement project,” the center says.

Cleaning is generally considered an important step in preventing illness and injury from many housing-related hazards. However, some of the very products used to clean the home actually contain chemicals that can be harmful to people’s health.

“Cleaning products, pesticides, chemicals, and household plants can be poisonous,” Saucer says.

Household products that are pesticides are considered necessary for keeping the home safe and clean from other health risks. Insect repellents, rodent poisons, disinfectants, sanitizers, and lawn products can also be harmful to humans. The EPA offers many tips on using pesticides safely in and around the home.

Solid knowledge and prevention of housing-related hazards go a long way in maintaining a healthy home for individuals and families.