Is Your Home Making You or Your Family Sick?
An Introduction to Indoor Air Quality
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Which is dirtier: outdoor or indoor air?
If you answered indoor air, you are correct. In the U.S., more than 90 percent of Americans’ time is now spent indoors. Yet the air inside homes and other buildings can be many times more polluted than outdoor or ambient air. As a result, some Americans may be exposed to significant levels of indoor air pollutants on a daily basis. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

This guide is intended to help you make informed choices that can reduce your exposure to indoor air pollution. The guide identifies common indoor air pollutants that you may encounter in your home. At the end of the guide, a room-by-room checklist will help you take action to minimize indoor air pollutants and make your home a healthier place to live, work, and play.

Radon
Radon is a naturally occurring gas that is common across much of Kentucky. Radon is produced from the gradual breakdown of uranium in soil, rock, and water. Radon gas can enter homes and buildings through cracks, gaps, and crevices in floors, walls, and a building or home’s foundation. Once inside your home, the level of radon gas can build up.

Radon claims the lives of over 20,000 Americans each year as the number one cause of lung cancer deaths among non-smokers.

Take Action:
- Test your home for radon.
- If your home has high radon levels, consult a radon removal contractor. Radon contractors will install a ground-level ventilation system that will prevent radon levels from building up inside your home. For a listing of contractors visit the National Radon Safety Board at www.nrsb.org or the National Radon Proficiency Program at www.nrpp.info.

For more information on testing procedures and how to reduce radon in your home, contact the Kentucky Radon Program at (502) 564-4856 or visit their website at http://chfs.ky.gov/dph/info/phps/radonlevels.htm.

Tobacco Smoke
Secondhand smoke can cause cancer and other illnesses. Children are especially at risk. Asthma, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), bronchitis, pneumonia, and ear infections may result when children are exposed to secondhand smoke.

Take Action:
- Keep your home and car smoke-free. (This includes cigarettes, cigars, and pipes.)
- Need help quitting? Call Kentucky’s Tobacco Hotline at 1-800-QUIT-NOW for free counseling.
Molds produce tiny spores that travel through the air and either settle on surfaces to create new mold colonies or are inhaled creating allergic reactions or asthma in certain people. Molds can grow on most surfaces as long as moisture is present (including on wood, paper, carpet, drywall, clothing, and foods).

In your home, the key to controlling mold growth is controlling moisture. Walls or ceilings that are moldy may be discolored, show signs of water damage, and/or have black or green spots. A musty, earthy odor or foul stench may also be noticed in an area with mold.

**Take Action To Prevent Mold:**
- Fix water leaks quickly.
- Areas or items that are water damaged should be dried within 24-48 hours.
- Vent dryers, stoves, and other appliances that generate moisture to the outside.
- Use air conditioners and dehumidifiers to keep indoor humidity below 50 percent. Remember to empty drip pans regularly.
- Use an exhaust fan or open a window in the kitchen when cooking, dishwashing, or running the dishwasher, and in the bathroom when showering.
- Follow your manufacturer’s instructions when cleaning your refrigerator’s drip pan and hoses.
- Reduce condensation on surfaces, such as windows, piping, exterior walls, roofs, and floors that get cold by installing or adding insulation.
- Do not install carpet in areas of your home where moisture will likely be present, such as around sinks.

**Take Action to Safely Clean up Mold:** If you currently have a mold problem in your home, measure the size of the area that is moldy. If the area is less than 10 square feet (roughly 3 ft by 3 ft area) then you may be able to clean the area yourself. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has a set of guidelines to walk you through cleaning up the area safely. Those guidelines are available online at [http://www.epa.gov/mold/pdfs/moldguide.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/mold/pdfs/moldguide.pdf). Note if you or a family member has a health concern, talk to a healthcare professional before beginning cleanup. Professional remediation services are recommended if mold is present in areas larger than 10 square feet, areas with significant water damage, inside heating/ventilation/air conditioning (HVAC) systems, or areas with damage caused by sewage or contaminated water. Additional information about mold is available online at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s website [http://www.epa.gov/mold/](http://www.epa.gov/mold/). In addition the Kentucky Department for Public Health Environmental Management Branch can provide information related to mold cleanup; questions can be directed to (502) 564-4856.

We usually think of houseplants as good for the air, but sometimes they can actually contribute to indoor air quality problems. The damp soil in potted plants may promote mold and fungus growth which can cause allergic reactions in some individuals.

**Biologicals**
Bacteria, molds, mildews, viruses, pet dander, dust mites, cockroaches, and pollen are all examples of biological contaminants.

Pet hair by itself is not usually the cause of allergic reactions. Proteins found in pet dander (dried skin flakes), urine, and dried saliva are the primary trigger of allergic reactions and asthma. Remember that dogs and cats are not the only pets that can trigger allergies and asthma. Hamsters, guinea-pigs, and other warm-blooded mammals also create pet dander.

In the United States, asthma affects over 25 million Americans, including an estimated 7.1 million children, and accounts for 10.5 million missed days of school for children each year. According to the Office of Health Policy, Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Kentucky had 5,826 asthma hospitalizations in 2012 with a cost of over $86 million.
**Take Action:**
- If you or someone you live with is sensitive to pet dander you may consider finding a new home for your pet.

**OR**

- Keep pets out of the bedroom of the person experiencing allergies or asthma.
- Do not allow pets on furniture.
- Vacuum carpets and furniture when the person with allergies and asthma is not at home.
- Dust surfaces frequently using a damp cloth.

**Dust mites** are tiny bugs that feed on human and pet dander (dried skin flakes). Dust mites are found in every home in mattresses, pillows, carpets, upholstered furniture, bedcovers, clothes, stuffed toys, and fabric-covered items. Dust mites and their droppings can trigger symptoms such as a runny or stuffy nose, coughing, sneezing, and watery eyes, and can even result in asthma in individuals that are allergic to them.

**Take Action:**
- Bedding should be washed in hot water and dried completely each week.
- Dust-proof protectors should be used on pillows and mattresses.
- Carpets and furniture should be vacuumed frequently. A vacuum cleaner equipped with a HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) filter is recommended.
- Replace stuffed toys with toys that can be easily cleaned or choose stuffed toys that can be washed and dried completely.

For more information on dust mites download the House Dust Mites Extension Bulletin online at [http://www2.ca.uky.edu/entomology/entfacts/ef646.asp](http://www2.ca.uky.edu/entomology/entfacts/ef646.asp) or contact your county Extension agent and request a copy.

**Carbon Monoxide**

Carbon monoxide is a poisonous gas that cannot be seen, tasted, or smelled. Symptoms of carbon monoxide exposure include headaches, dizziness, disorientation, nausea, fatigue, and even death. Carbon monoxide can result from unvented kerosene and gas space heaters, leaking chimneys and furnaces, back-drafting from furnaces, gas water heaters, wood stoves, fireplaces, gas stoves, generators and other gasoline-powered equipment, automobile exhaust from attached garages, and tobacco smoke.

**Take Action:**
- Install a carbon monoxide detector near each sleeping room and on each floor of your home. The detector should be battery-operated or have a battery-backup.
- Have a qualified professional inspect and service your heating system (furnaces, flues, and chimneys), water heater, and other gas, oil, or coal-burning appliances annually.
- NEVER use gasoline or charcoal-burning devices (such as generators, charcoal grills, and camp stoves) indoors.
- Do not idle your vehicle inside your garage.
- Make sure that your wood stove is properly sized and EPA certified, and that doors fit tightly.
- Keep flues open when using your fireplace.
- Vent gas stoves to the outdoors.
- Replace unvented space heaters with vented space heaters.
Carbon Monoxide—Take Action Continued...

- If you use a generator during a power outage, place the generator at least 15-25 feet away from the house and at a location that the wind will not carry fumes towards a window or door. NEVER operate the generator in an attached garage, even with the garage door open.

According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, each year an average of 81 deaths are reported due to carbon monoxide poisoning from generators.

Organic Gases (also referred to as Volatile Organic Compounds or VOCs)

Organic gases are emitted by a wide range of products. Examples include aerosols such as hair spray and cooking spray, air fresheners, cleaning products, disinfectants, paint, and other solvents. Organic gases can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation, headaches, loss of coordination, and nausea, and some may be associated with damage to the kidneys, liver, and central nervous system and certain cancers. Keep in mind that many factors, including the level of exposure and the length of time exposed to the pollutant, play a part in the extent of the health effect.

Take Action:
- Follow label directions and warnings on all products.
- Increase ventilation when using products that may emit organic gases.
- Purchase products in quantities that you will be able to use.
- Dispose of products and containers safely (contact your local Solid Waste Coordinator or county Extension agent if you are unsure about disposal of an item).
- Store products according to manufacturers’ instructions, out of the reach of children and/or pets.

Make your own environmentally-friendly cleaners, disinfectants, and air fresheners using common ingredients found in your pantry, such as vinegar, baking soda, and cornstarch. Green cleaning recipes are available online at http://www2.ca.uky.edu/hes/fcs/factshts/green-cleaning-recipe-cards.pdf or at your county Extension office.

Particle Pollution (also referred to as fine particles or particulate matter)

Particle pollution is a combination of solid particles and liquid droplets found in the air. Examples include dust, pollen, mold, and even metals. Potential sources include construction sites, unpaved roads, fires, power plants, industries, and automobiles. When inhaled, these particles can get deep into the lungs and, in some cases, into the bloodstream. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, numerous scientific studies have shown that exposure to particle pollution can trigger asthma and cause serious health problems including decreased lung function, irregular heartbeat, heart attack, and even premature death in people with heart or lung disease.

Take Action:
- Do not allow smoking indoors.
- Reduce use of candles, woodstoves, and fireplaces.
- Burn only dry, seasoned wood.
- Do not burn newspaper or wrapping paper in your fireplace.
Formaldehyde
Formaldehyde is a chemical used in making building materials and numerous other household products including glues, paints, and wrinkle-resistant textiles. It is also released during combustion.

The main source of formaldehyde in homes is generally pressed-wood products that contain urea-formaldehyde resins (such as particleboard, hardwood plywood paneling, and medium density fiberboard). Pressed-wood products are often used for sub-flooring, shelving, cabinetry, decorative wall covering, and furniture. Formaldehyde is a colorless gas with a strong odor that can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation, nausea, difficulty in breathing, wheezing, coughing, fatigue, and allergic reactions. High concentrations may trigger asthma and more serious health effects.

Take Action:
- Use “exterior-grade” pressed-wood products. These products contain phenol resins as opposed to urea resins, and generally emit a lower concentration of formaldehyde.
- NEVER burn plywood, particleboard, or fiberboard.
- Use air conditioning and dehumidifiers. Regulating humidity and temperature can help reduce emissions.
- When purchasing new building materials, cabinetry, or furniture, ask about the formaldehyde content. Increase ventilation when bringing these and other items that may have a high-formaldehyde content into your home.
- Launder wrinkle-resistant clothing and fabrics before use. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, fabrics most likely to contain formaldehyde include rayon, blended cotton, corduroy, wrinkle-resistant 100% cotton, shrink-proof wool, and heavy stiff fabrics.

Pesticides
Pesticides are used to rid our homes of rodents, insects, and other pests. Pesticide exposure can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation, central nervous system and kidney damage, and an increased risk of cancer.

Take Action:
Many pests can be prevented or reduced by following these simple steps at home:
- Clean up spilled foods and remove garbage quickly.
- Seal cracks and crevices around your home.
- Keep doors and windows closed.
- Repair leaky faucets, clean out clogged gutters, and improve drainage around your home’s foundation.
If using pesticides:
- Always follow label instructions and warnings.
- Increase ventilation when using.
- Purchase in quantities that you will be able to use.
- Dispose of products and containers safely (contact your local Solid Waste Coordinator or county Extension agent if you are unsure about proper disposal of an item).
- Store according to manufacturers’ instructions, out of the reach of children and/or pets.

For more information on home pest management download the *Managing Insect and Spider Pests in the Home* Extension Bulletin online at [http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/HENV/HENV401/HENV401.pdf](http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agc/pubs/HENV/HENV401/HENV401.pdf) or request a copy from your county Extension agent.

**Asbestos**

Asbestos is an odorless, tasteless, silicate mineral fiber that occurs naturally in rock and soil. It has been widely used in manufacturing because of its fiber strength, low cost, and resistance to heat and acid. Asbestos has also been used in a wide range of manufactured goods including building materials (roofing shingles, ceiling and floor tiles, paper products, and asbestos cement products), friction products (automobile clutch, brake, and transmission parts), heat-resistant fabrics, packaging, gaskets, and coatings.

Breathing asbestos fibers can lead to an increased risk of asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. The symptoms for these diseases often don’t appear for 20 to 30 years after the first exposure. Asbestos products can be categorized by the terms ‘friable’ and ‘non-friable.’ Non-friable asbestos products are not likely to release significant levels of fibers because the fibers are locked into the materials. In order to release fibers from non-friable asbestos products like floor tile, you would need to cut, sand, grind, or abrade the product. Non-friable product examples (containing more than 1 percent asbestos) include:
- Gaskets
- Resilient floor covering
- Asphalt roofing products
- Floor mastics

Friable asbestos products, on the other hand, release fibers easily when disturbed or damaged because the asbestos fibers are not locked into a substrate material. Friable product examples include:
- Ceiling tile
- Thermal insulation (such as around pipes)
- Fire proofing
- Sound proofing

It’s important to remember that most asbestos products present little risk if they are in good condition and are not disturbed. Friable asbestos poses the most risk of fiber release when damaged or disturbed. Under these conditions the material should be handled by trained individuals using proper Personal Protective Equipment. Non-friable products pose little threat of fiber release unless the products are subjected to cutting, sanding, grinding, or abrasing.

**Take Action:**
The presence of asbestos can’t be determined by simply looking at a product. Microscopic methods must be used to determine if a material contains asbestos. Laboratory analysis for an asbestos sample is relatively inexpensive. Many labs will process a sample for around $20.

If asbestos is found in a home, it poses little threat if left undisturbed. If it must be removed, it should be wetted and removed as intact as possible to prevent fibers from being released into the air. Federal regulations do not prevent the owner of a single-family residence from removing asbestos himself or herself; however, the risks should be well understood. Without proper precautions, renovations, demolitions, and even routine maintenance can cause asbestos-containing materials to release microscopic asbestos fibers into the air you breathe.
If a material in your home is damaged and you think the material may contain asbestos, do not touch or further disturb the material. Restrict activity in the area, and contact a trained and accredited asbestos professional for further instruction. Never attempt to clean up suspected asbestos-containing material with a vacuum cleaner (even those with HEPA filters), as doing so may cause more material to become airborne. For additional information and a list of certified and/or accredited asbestos professionals contact the Kentucky Division for Air Quality at (502)-564-3999.

**Lead**

Prior to 1978, many homes used lead-based paint. Since that time, lead-based paint has been banned, but in some homes the old paint still remains. Lead-based paint that is chipping or peeling can create lead dust that can be inhaled or swallowed. Exposure to lead can cause serious health problems, especially for children. Lead poisoning in children can lead to learning and behavioral problems and brain, hearing, and nervous system damage. In adults, lead poisoning can affect the nervous system, increase blood pressure, impair kidney function, and lead to reproductive problems.

**Take Action:**

If you think your home may have lead-based paint, have your home tested. For a list of certified companies that do lead inspections and abatement, contact the Kentucky Environmental Lead Program at (502) 564-4537. If you have children in your home, contact your health care provider to have your children tested for lead poisoning.

Protect your family from lead and lead-dust.
- Keep your home clean and dust-free (especially children’s play areas).
- Do not disturb or remove lead-based paint on your own. Contact the Kentucky Environmental Lead Program for a list of certified lead detection and abatement companies.
- Dust surfaces frequently using a damp disposable cloth.
- Include foods rich in iron and calcium in your diet.

**Room-by-Room Guide to Key Indoor Air Pollutants**

**Bathroom**

Key Pollutants:
- Molds
- Organic gases (cleaning products)

**Kitchen**

Key Pollutants:
- Molds
- Pesticides
- Organic gases (cleaning products)
- Carbon monoxide (gas stove)

**Living Room**

Key Pollutants:
- Pet dander
- Environmental tobacco smoke
- Carbon monoxide (unvented fire place)
- Fine particulates
- Organic gases

**Bedroom**

Key Pollutants:
- Dust
- Organic gases

**Children’s Play Areas**

Key Pollutants:
- Dust
- Pet dander
- Organic gases

**Basement (or Lowest Level of Your Home)**

Key Pollutants:
- Carbon monoxide
- Organic gases
- Molds
- Radon

**Garage**

Key Pollutants:
- Carbon monoxide
- Organic gases
- Pesticides

**Construction/Demolition**

Key Pollutants:
- Asbestos
- Lead
Indoor Air Quality Home Checklist

Instructions: Read each question. If you answer YES read the Action Tip. If you answer NO go to the next question. In some of the questions you may be directed straight to the Action Tip. Note: for more information regarding any one Action Tip refer to the section of the bulletin noted in parenthesis. Use the space provided after each Action Tip to write down additional plans, notes, and target dates.

1. **Do you permit smoking in your home?**

   **Action Tip (Environmental Tobacco Smoke)**
   - Keep your home and car smoke-free.

2. **Radon is a naturally occurring gas that can cause lung cancer. See the Action Tip below.**

   **Action Tip (Radon)**
   - Test your home for radon.
   - If your home has high radon levels, consult a radon removal contractor. For a listing of contractors visit the National Radon Safety Board at [www.nrsb.org](http://www.nrsb.org) or the National Radon Proficiency Program at [www.nrpp.info](http://www.nrpp.info).

3. **Was your home built prior to 1978?**

   **Action Tip (Lead)**
   - Prior to 1978, many homes used lead-based paint.
   - Have your home tested.
   - Do not disturb or remove lead-based paint on your own.
   - If you have children in your home contact your health care provider to have your children tested for lead poisoning.
   - Keep your home clean and dust-free (especially children’s play areas).
   - Dust surfaces frequently using a damp disposable cloth.
   - Include foods rich in iron and calcium in your diet.

4. **Does your home have gas appliances and heating systems, such as a kerosene or gas space heater, gas water heater, and/or gas stove?**

   **Action Tip (Carbon Monoxide)**
   - Have a qualified professional inspect and service your heating system, water heater, and other gas, oil, or coal burning appliances annually.
   - Vent gas stoves to the outdoors.
   - Replace unvented space heaters with vented space heaters.
   - Install a carbon monoxide detector (that is battery-operated or has a battery back-up) near each sleeping area and on each floor of your home.

   **For a list of certified companies that do lead inspections and abatement contact the Kentucky Environmental Lead Program at (502) 564-4537.**
5. **Do you have a fireplace or woodstove?**

*Action Tip (Carbon Monoxide and Particle Pollution)*
- Have a qualified professional inspect and service flues, fireplaces, woodstoves, and chimneys annually.
- Make sure that your wood stove is properly sized and EPA certified, and that the doors fit tightly.
- Keep flues open when using your fireplace.
- Keep the doors of your wood-burning appliance closed unless loading or stoking a live fire.
- Burn only dry, well-seasoned wood.
- Never burn household garbage, plywood, particleboard, fiberboard, wrapping paper, or plastics in your fireplace or woodstove.
- Install a carbon monoxide detector (that is battery-operated or has a battery back-up) near each sleeping area and on each floor of your home.

Kentucky’s open burning regulation prohibits burning of construction and demolition materials, as well as many other materials including garbage. The Division for Air Quality can impose fines of up to $25,000 per day per violation of the law for burning illegal items. Burning these items can release toxic pollutants, many of which have been linked to increased risk of cancer, respiratory diseases, nervous system disorders and reproductive and developmental problems. For more information on open burning visit the Kentucky Division for Air Quality’s Open Burning website at [http://air.ky.gov/Pages/OpenBurning.aspx](http://air.ky.gov/Pages/OpenBurning.aspx).

6. **Do you have indoor pets?**

*Action Tip (Biologicals)*
Pet dander, urine, and saliva can trigger allergic reactions and asthma.

- If you or someone you live with is sensitive to the proteins found in pet dander, urine, and saliva you may consider finding a new home for your pet.

**OR**

- Keep pets out of the bedroom of the person experiencing allergies or asthma.
- Do not allow pets on furniture.
- Vacuum carpets and furniture when the person with allergies and asthma is not at home.
- Dust surfaces frequently using a damp cloth.

7. **Do you or your family use any of the following items:**
- Craft supplies (such as adhesives, glues, permanent markers)
- Aerosol sprays (such as cooking spray, hair spray)
- Air fresheners
- Cleaning products and disinfectants
- Pesticides (including moth balls)
- Paints, lacquers, and paint strippers

*Action Tip (Organic Gases)*
Organic gases are emitted by a range of products, such as craft supplies, aerosol sprays, air fresheners, and cleaning products and disinfectants, pesticides, and paints.

- Follow label directions and warnings on all products.
- Increase ventilation when using products that may emit organic gases.
- Purchase products in quantities that you will be able to use.
- Dispose of products and containers safely (contact your local Solid Waste Coordinator or county Extension agent if you are unsure about disposal of an item).
- Store products according to manufacturers’ instructions, out of the reach of children and/or pets.
8. **Do you have carpeting in your home?**

*Action Tip (Biologicais)*
Carpets can collect and harbor pollutants such as dust mites, pet dander, cockroach allergens, and mold spores.

- Replace carpeting with hard-surfaced flooring and rugs that can be removed and cleaned.

  **OR**

- Vacuum with a HEPA filter at least three times a week, preferably when the person experiencing allergic reactions or asthma is not home.

9. **Are you planning to purchase new carpet for any area of your home?**

*Action Tip (Organic Gases)*
New carpet may emit organic gases.

- If possible, leave your home while the carpet is being installed.
- Increase ventilation during and after installation.

10. **a) Are you planning to remodel your home?**
    b) Does your home have damaged building materials (such as crumbling siding, shingles, or insulation that is falling apart)?
    c) Are any floor tiles damaged or deteriorating?

*Action Tip (Asbestos)*
Asbestos is used in a wide range of products including building materials. If a material in your home is damaged or disturbed and you think the material may contain asbestos:

- Do not touch or further disturb the material.
- Restrict activity in the area.
- Contact a trained and accredited asbestos professional for further instruction.

For additional information and a list of certified and/or accredited asbestos professionals contact the Kentucky Division for Air Quality at (502)-564-3999.

11. **Do you use pesticides, such as insect spray or moth repellents?**

*Action Tip (Pesticides)*
Many pests can be prevented or reduced by following these simple steps at home:

- Clean up spilled foods and remove garbage quickly.
- Seal cracks and crevices around your home.
- Keep doors and windows closed.
- Repair leaky faucets, clean out clogged gutters, and improve drainage around your home's foundation.

If using pesticides:
- Always follow label instructions and warnings.
- Increase ventilation when using.
- Purchase in quantities that you will be able to use.
- Dispose of products and containers safely (contact your local Solid Waste Coordinator or county Extension agent if you are unsure about disposal of an item).
- Store according to manufacturers’ instructions, out of the reach of children and/or pets.
12. a) Do you smell a musty, earthy odor or foul stench?
   b) Is there an area of the wall or ceiling that is discolored, shows signs of water damage, or has black or green spots?
   c) Are there any signs of leaking water (faucets, pipes under sink, etc.)?

   Action Tip (Biologicals)
   If you answered yes to any of these questions you may have mold. Refer to the Mold section for information on safely cleaning up mold.

13. Do you have houseplants?

   Action Tip (Biologicals)
   Houseplants that are watered frequently or have damp soil may promote mold and fungus growth.

   □ If your houseplants require frequent watering, you may want to replace your houseplants with plants that require less water and drier conditions or choose to have no houseplants.

14. Dust mites are found in every home in mattresses, pillows, carpets, upholstered furniture, bedcovers, clothes, stuffed toys, and fabric-covered items. See the Action Tip below to control dust mites.

   Action Tip (Biologicals)
   □ Bedding should be washed in hot water and dried completely each week.
   □ Dust-proof protectors should be used on pillows and mattresses.
   □ Carpets and furniture should be vacuumed weekly. A vacuum cleaner equipped with a HEPA filter is recommended.
   □ Replace stuffed toys with toys that can be easily cleaned or choose stuffed toys that can be washed and dried completely.
References:


