

# KEYS TO A HEALTHY HOME



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You spend a lot of time in your home, so it makes sense to keep your home safe and healthy. A few simple habits, like dusting and decluttering, can have long-term benefits for you and your family. Just opening the windows and letting in some fresh air can have a big impact on your health!

This booklet will guide you through the keys to a healthy home. It highlights some common household concerns and shows you how to deal with them before they become big (and expensive) problems.

If you adopt some easy, everyday practices, you'll be on the path to a healthy home in no time!



## KEEP YOUR HOME CLEAN

The first key to a healthy home is keeping it clean. Regular cleaning isn't just for neat freaks. Cleaning reduces dust and other irritants that can bother people with allergies and asthma. It also keeps away disease-carrying insects and rodents.

### *In the Kitchen*

- Sweep your kitchen floor daily to keep dust at bay.
- Clean up spilled food and liquids immediately. If left to settle, they're harder to remove and will attract pests.
- Mop floors weekly to clean up dirt the broom didn't catch.
- Seal all leftover food and put it in a cupboard or in the fridge so it won't attract pests.
- Wash dishes after every meal. The sooner you do the dishes, the easier they are to clean.

- Wash the kitchen sink once a week.
- Empty the garbage every day to prevent flies and mice.
- Clean your kitchen appliances (oven, microwave, blender, toaster, and fridge) once a month.
- Dispose of food that has passed its expiration date to prevent mold growth.
- Clean your pantry and cabinets once a month.
- Check for wet areas or leaks. Water encourages mold growth.
- Don't leave pet food out overnight. It attracts pests.
- Create spaces for your silverware, dishes, and utensils to speed clean-up and cut down on clutter.



## Good Idea



Use two buckets to mop floors—one for clean water and one to wring your dirty water into. That way you won't be spreading dirty water around your floor.

## Around the House

- Reduce clutter. It creates hiding places for pests. Regularly donate clothes or other items you haven't used in over a year.
- Dust shelves, windowsills, and woodwork weekly.
- Vacuum your house weekly. And don't forget the upholstery.
- Wash sheets, blankets, and pillowcases in very hot water to kill dust mites.
- Get your carpet washed by a professional every 12 to 18 months.
- Wash curtains once a month. Dust and dirt build up gradually, so wash curtains even if they don't look dirty.

## Good Idea



Invest in a vacuum with a HEPA filter. HEPA filters trap small particles that may cause problems for people who suffer from allergies or other respiratory problems. Wear a dust mask while cleaning if you have allergies or if you're sensitive to dust.



## Pets

You love your pet. But did you know dead skin cells from pets, called dander, attract dust mites and can trigger allergies and asthma?

- Keep pets outside as much as possible.
- Don't allow pets on the furniture.
- Vacuum and dust twice a week.

## Cleaning Supplies

Check for these potentially harmful cleaning products:

- Bleach
- Oven cleaner
- Wood polish
- Toilet and drain cleaners
- Shoe polish
- Glass cleaners
- Powdered household cleaners
- Kitchen and bathroom cleaning spray

Here are some simple steps you can take to keep your family safe around cleaning supplies.

- Buy only what you need to do the job.
- Read and follow the directions on product labels.
- Never mix two products together unless you're sure it's safe.
- Never mix bleach and ammonia.
- Buy products in childproof containers.
- Keep hazardous products in their original containers.
- Recycle all the products that you can—for example, oil, antifreeze, and products with mercury.





## **KEEP YOUR HOME FREE OF CONTAMINANTS**

The second key to a healthy home is keeping it free of contaminants. Contaminants are potentially harmful substances such as lead, asbestos, and carbon monoxide that can enter your home through the water supply, through the air, or even be contained in your walls.

Contact with contaminants can lead to serious health problems, including kidney and liver problems, respiratory illnesses, and even cancer. But knowing the risks and taking steps to protect your family from harmful contaminants can keep your home safe.

### **In the Air**

Airborne contaminants are difficult to detect because they often have no color or odor. Exposure to common contaminants such as radon, carbon monoxide, and asbestos can lead to lung cancer and respiratory illness.

**Radon** occurs naturally in the earth and can drift into your home through the basement.

**How do you detect it?** Buy a radon detection kit from your local hardware store or online.

**What do you do if you have it?** Have a contractor install basement vents to remove radon from your house.

**Carbon monoxide** is produced when fuel is burned in a furnace or other heating system. It should be vented to the outside, but if ducts are damaged or blocked, carbon monoxide can build up in your home.

**How do you detect it?** Purchase carbon monoxide detectors, and place them within 15 feet of every sleeping area.

**What do you do if you have it?** If your carbon monoxide detector goes off, leave the house immediately and call 911.

**Asbestos** was used as a building material—particularly in insulation—until the 1970s. It can cause lung cancer and respiratory illnesses.

**How do you detect it?** If your home was built before the 1970s, there's a good chance it contains asbestos insulation.

**What do you do if you have it?** Leave asbestos areas undisturbed and call an asbestos removal expert.





## **In the Water**

Most people get their water from a public utility that purifies it before it reaches their homes. Still, your drinking water can be contaminated, potentially causing serious illnesses. If you're concerned about your water's content, request a report from your utility.

**Check for these potential contaminants:**

**Bacteria and viruses** in drinking water may cause upset stomach, diarrhea, or more serious illnesses.

**Nitrate** gets into water from animal and human waste and from fertilizer. In babies younger than six months, nitrate can cause a serious condition called blue baby syndrome. If your baby develops a blue or purple-colored face, see a doctor right away.

**Lead and copper** can get into water from your pipes. Too much lead can cause learning and behavior problems in children, as well as other illnesses. Copper can cause colic in babies and upset stomachs or diarrhea in older children and adults.

**Pesticides, gas, and oil** can seep into the ground and get into drinking water, causing damage to the kidneys, liver, or other organs. Some cause cancer and others can cause problems if you are pregnant.

## **Good Idea**



If you have a private water supply, such as a well, don't use pesticides and don't dispose of chemical waste nearby. Get your water tested by a professional every year.

## Focus On: Lead



Lead is an element that was often used in paint and pipes before 1978. Lead exposure can cause hearing loss, learning disabilities, and violent behavior in children. For adults, lead can cause concentration problems, high blood pressure, and reproductive problems.

If your home was built before 1978, it may contain lead paint and/or piping. Here are some simple steps you can take to keep your family safe from lead exposure:

- Gently wipe door frames, banisters, stairs, railings, porches, fences, windowsills, and walls with a damp paper towel. Throw out the towel when you're done.
- If you're renovating your home, make sure the contractor is certified in lead-safe practices.
- Run the cold water for three minutes straight to flush out potential built-up lead. The best times to do this are in the morning or whenever you haven't used the water for several hours.
- Try to minimize the disintegration of paint chips; the more they crumble, the more lead they spread around.
- Do not scrape, sand, or burn any substance you believe may contain lead—it will only disperse the lead further.

If you suspect your child may have had contact with lead, ask your doctor to test him or her for the substance.

Many hardware stores sell affordable lead test kits that you can use to check your water and paint for lead. These home test kits are useful, but it's always safest to hire a professional to test for lead in your home.



## KEEP YOUR HOME DRY

The third key to a healthy home is keeping it dry. Too much water in the home causes mold, structural damage, and provides optimal conditions for some pests, especially termites.

### Around the House

- Clean the bathroom regularly by scrubbing the toilet, tub, sink, and other fixtures.
- Make sure sinks and tubs are draining and that water is not pooling anywhere.
- Dry clothes thoroughly before folding them.
- Run an exhaust fan while showering and cooking.
- Clean up spills and puddles immediately.
- Get rid of objects that have been ruined by water.

## Prevention

- Unblock gutters so water is diverted away from your house.
- Seal cracks in your home with caulk.
- Fix leaky pipes immediately. Dripping water can cause serious damage over time.

## Focus On: Mold



Mold is the common word for a fungus on wood, food, or paper. Mold has the potential to irritate your lungs. If you have a sore throat, skin rash, difficulty breathing, or a bloody nose, you may be affected by mold.

Look for mold in these places:

- Wet clothes
- Basements
- Attics
- Concrete foundations
- Tubs
- Sinks
- Toilets
- Drywall, insulation, or anywhere damaged by flooding

Water comes into your house through cracks in door and window frames, or through leaks in walls, roofs, showerheads, clothes washers, and faucets. Even the respiration of your houseplants can increase humidity in your home.



## Good Idea



An inexpensive hygrometer, available at home improvement stores, will tell you whether the humidity in your house is at an appropriate level (30 to 55 percent). Humidity varies with the seasons, but high humidity can also be a result of roof leaks or an unvented bathroom.

If you see mold growing on drywall, studs, or subflooring—especially if the area exceeds 10 square feet—you should call a professional. Find a mold removal specialist in the yellow pages under “Fire and Water Damage Restoration.”







## KEEP YOUR HOME WELL MAINTAINED

The fourth key to a healthy home is maintenance. Maintenance ensures that the vital systems (ventilation, plumbing, waste management) in your house are in good shape and running smoothly. These systems don't necessarily require constant, daily supervision, but they do need to be checked periodically. If there's a problem, it could lead to some of the issues described earlier, such as high humidity, excessive dust, and contamination.

Over time you'll find that some simple upkeep on your home will prevent major (and potentially expensive) repairs.

## Inside the House

- Regularly remove garbage and materials for recycling from your home.
- Check for leaks. Examine pipes under sinks and in the basement. Check your refrigerator, boiler, water meter, dishwasher, and washing machine hoses as well. If you see any leaks, repair them immediately, before mold has a chance to grow.
- Clean and empty humidifiers and dehumidifiers. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- Check the flues and vents of your heating system to ensure they're connected correctly. If not, carbon monoxide could build up inside your home.
- Look for blocked vents, which make your heating system work harder, costing you money.

### Focus On: Air Conditioners



Even if your air conditioner appears to be running well, regular maintenance is important. It prevents the spread of dirt and dust, and ensures the air conditioner is trapping moisture and keeping humidity low.

- Clean your air conditioner's filter regularly.
- Clean your air conditioner's coils.
- Repair bent fins on the coils.
- Check the seal between a room air conditioner and the window. It should be tight to prevent air leaks.
- Remove or cover a window air conditioner during seasons when it's not in use so dirt doesn't build up inside it.

## Good Idea



Once a year, have a professional examine your heating and central air-conditioning system, as well as your oven and range. Minor repairs now could save you lots of money down the road.

## Outside the House

The exterior of your home and your yard may seem like an intimidating area to maintain. But simple, routine maintenance will keep your home safe and prevent costly problems.

- Make sure your siding is painted, cleaned, and undamaged so it continues to protect your house from moisture.
- Replace worn and damaged roof shingles to prevent water from getting inside.
- If you use well water, have the quality of the water checked once a year.
- If you have a septic system, have a professional inspect it once every three years.
- Clean and unblock your dryer vent twice a year.
- Repair broken windows as soon as possible.
- Look for peeling paint, as it can contribute to poor air quality in the house and possibly bring in lead.
- Check the caulking around door and window frames, and repair it when necessary.



## In Your Yard

In addition to keeping your yard mowed, weeded, and in general good condition, there are a few simple steps you can take to keep it safe and well maintained.

Twice a year:

- Check for and remove objects in the yard that would cause tripping or hurt someone, especially anything with sharp edges.
- Check for signs of rodents, bats, and termites.
- Clean gutters and downspouts.

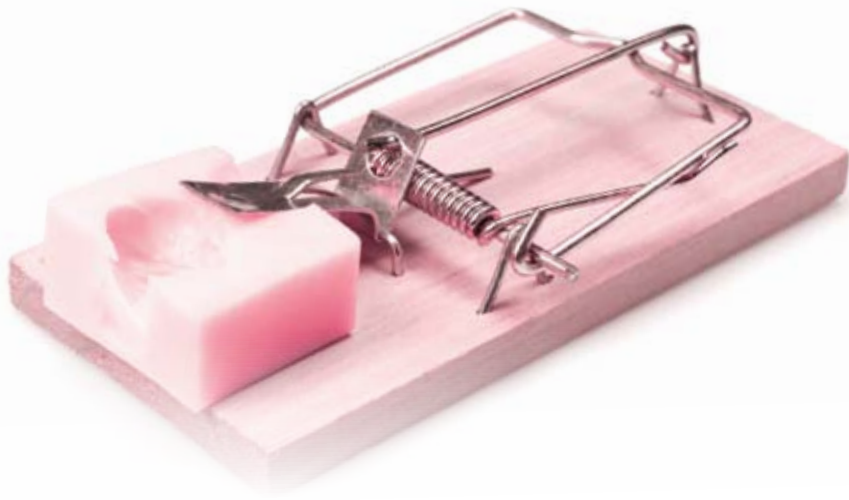
Use chemical pesticides and fertilizers sparingly in your yard, as they can be harmful to people. Better yet, use low-toxicity, biodegradable products.

## Good Idea



Making roof repairs may seem like a big job, but letting minor damage spread can lead to even more expensive structural damage and serious mold problems.





## KEEP YOUR HOME PEST-FREE

The fifth key to a healthy home is keeping it pest-free. Insects and rodents can trigger allergies and spread disease. Pests seek out food and hiding places, so the most important step you can take is to keep your home clean and clutter-free. But if your paths do cross, here are some ways to take care of rodent and insect invaders.

### Rodents

Mice and rats can carry diseases, such as rat bite fever—a bacterial infection caused by mouse and rat bites—and hantavirus, which is carried through mouse and rat waste and can be inhaled by humans.



Look for these signs of rodents in your house:

- Gnawed wood or electrical cords
- Droppings
- Nests
- Scampering noises

The best way to keep rodents out is to keep a clean and clutter-free house. In addition, try these steps:

- Seal exterior gaps with mortar.
- Install weather-stripping at the bottom of basement and garage doors.
- Eliminate all water and food sources around the house, including bird feeders and pet dishes.
- Keep all food (pet and human) in airtight plastic, glass, or steel containers.
- Get a house cat. A cat can help with mice but not rats.

## Good Idea



Rodent traps can help eliminate an infestation in your home. Set traps at night and check them regularly. Otherwise, animals could learn to avoid the traps when they see other animals caught in them.

## Insects

The most common insects you'll encounter in your home are dust mites, cockroaches, and fleas and ticks.

**Dust mites** are too small to see without a microscope. They eat skin cells shed by people, and they thrive in warm, humid environments. Many people suffer from dust mite allergies, which are similar to hay fever.

**What can you do?** In most homes, bedding, upholstered furniture, and carpeting provide an ideal environment for dust mites. Clean and dust these areas regularly.

**Cockroaches** are unseemly and their droppings can be harmful to people with asthma.

**What can you do?** Eliminate their food source, and cockroaches will go away. Clean up food spills immediately and put away all food. When using bait traps, put them in corners and against walls, where cockroaches are likely to travel.

**Fleas and ticks** are carried into the house by pets and on clothing.

**What can you do?** Control fleas by washing bedding often, shampooing pets, vacuuming floors, and using flea combs and traps.



## Focus On: Pesticides



Chemical pesticides can help control insect and rodent problems when used properly, but they can also be harmful to people. Children are especially at risk because they may not know the dangers of bug sprays, flea collars, rat poison, and other pesticides.

Here are some tips to stay safe around pesticides:

- Always read the instructions.
- Be extra careful when using airborne pesticides such as sprays and flea bombs.
- Keep pesticides stored out of reach of children, and don't put traps or poisons where kids might find them.
- Always wash your hands after handling hazardous products.

If you cannot handle an infestation on your own, call an exterminator.







## KEEP YOUR HOME SAFE

The sixth key to a healthy home is keeping it safe. Being aware of the most common dangers around your home can keep you and your family safe.

### Fire

- Install smoke detectors on every floor of your home.
- Plan two escape routes from your home in the event of a fire. Make sure all family members know the routes.
- Make sure all family members know emergency numbers.
- Set a timer when you cook so you don't forget the stove or oven is on.

- Keep curtains far away from stovetop burners.
- Keep a fire extinguisher in the house.
- Keep space heaters away from walls, and don't leave them on when you're sleeping.
- Have your furnace checked regularly by a professional.
- Don't smoke in bed.
- Make sure heat-producing appliances such as curling irons and blow dryers are cool before you put them away.
- Check electrical cords. They shouldn't be warm while in use.

### Focus On: Falls



Slips and falls are potentially dangerous to everyone, but preventing falls is especially important for older adults because even a slight fall can cause broken bones or more serious injury. Here are some ways to make your house "fall-free":

- Keep your home well lit.
- Use nonskid mats under your rugs.
- Take care when you're carrying something that blocks your view.
- Repair broken steps.
- Make sure steps are even in height.
- Secure all railings and banisters.
- Put a nonslip floor or mat in the tub.
- Install a grab bar in the tub and near the toilet.



## Firearms

- Keep firearms in a locked cabinet.
- Keep ammunition and firearms in separate locations.
- Keep trigger safety locks on at all times.

## Choking and Suffocation

The home can be an especially perilous environment for young children because they aren't fully aware of potential dangers.

Children are at much greater risk than adults for choking and suffocation. Watch children carefully, and keep them from putting objects in their mouths. Also:

- Avoid clothing or decorations with ribbons or strings, which are choking hazards.
- Don't leave babies older than five months alone with dangling crib toys; they can push themselves up and get tangled in them.
- Pick up coins and marbles off the floor and anywhere children can reach them.
- Keep balloons and plastic bags away from infants.
- Don't give children popcorn or hard candy; it can easily get stuck in their throats.



## Swimming Pools

- Don't leave children alone around a pool.
- If a child goes missing in your home, check the pool first.
- Build a fence around your pool, and make sure young children can't reach the latch.
- Don't allow food or chewing gum around the pool.
- Consider buying an alarm that sounds when children (or others) are in the pool or pool area.

## Poisoning

- Keep pesticides and household cleaners out of the reach of children.
- Dispose of all unused household chemicals rather than storing them in your home.
- Wash your hands after using pesticides or household chemicals.

## Good Idea



If you care for small children, you should be trained in CPR. Choking and suffocation are the most common causes of preventable death in children younger than 12 months old.





## KEEP YOUR HOME WELL VENTILATED

The seventh key to a healthy home is ventilation. Ventilation is important because it helps expel dust and lingering odors, such as those from household chemicals and pesticides, and keeps your home dry and mold-free.

### In the Home

- When you take a shower, run the fan to remove moisture.
- While cooking, run an exhaust fan to dispel steam and cooking fumes.
- When weather permits, open up your windows and let air out of your home naturally.

Many household products release volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that can cause respiratory problems. VOCs such as formaldehyde can be found in carpets, paints, cleaning products, and furnishings. One of the best ways to reduce your exposure to VOCs is by making sure your home has adequate ventilation.

- When painting inside your home, open the windows for fresh air.
- If you install new carpeting or furniture, air out the rooms with fans before moving back in.
- Use extra ventilation when cleaning or using glues or permanent markers.

### Good Idea



Exhaust fans and ventilation systems should vent air to the outside, not to another location in the house.

### Focus On: Whole House Ventilation



Almost all homes have spot ventilation systems for the kitchen and bathroom. If your home feels humid and stagnant and odors linger, consider a whole house mechanical ventilation system. It supplies fresh air to your entire home and reduces the concentration of contaminants.





## KEEP YOUR HOME EFFICIENT

The final key to a healthy home is efficiency. Having an energy-efficient, thermally controlled home can help keep your family comfortable and healthy. Extreme temperatures and drafts can lead to health problems. Maintaining an efficient home will help you save on your monthly bills too.

### Energy Efficiency

- Maintain your home's heating and cooling systems. Have a technician inspect and tune up your furnace so that it runs well.
- When purchasing new appliances, opt for Energy Star models. They use less energy.
- When you're not using it, turn it off. Whether it's the lights, the computer, or another electronic device, remember to turn it off when you leave the room. Also, unplug chargers when they are not in use.

### Thermal Control

It's important to be able to control the temperature of your home and prevent it from getting too hot or too cold. Here are some ways to keep the temperature just right.

- Use a programmable thermostat to adjust your home's temperature automatically and efficiently. Make a schedule, then program the thermostat to set different temperatures when you are home and away.
- Insulate your home. Proper insulation, weather-stripping, and caulk can help prevent air from escaping your home, keeping it at a consistent temperature and free of drafts.

### Good Idea



Schedule a home energy audit or energy assessment. This will tell you how much energy your home consumes and will help you identify ways to make it more energy efficient. The auditor will walk you through the steps to retrofit your home for both efficiency and comfort.



# Resources



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Healthy Homes

[www.cdc.gov/healthyhomes](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyhomes)

National Center for Healthy Housing

[www.nchh.org](http://www.nchh.org)

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: Making Homes Healthier for Families

[www.hud.gov/offices/lead/healthyhomes/index.cfm](http://www.hud.gov/offices/lead/healthyhomes/index.cfm)

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Aging Initiative

[www.epa.gov/aging/resources/factsheets/index.htm](http://www.epa.gov/aging/resources/factsheets/index.htm)

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Indoor Air Quality

[www.epa.gov/iaq/index.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/index.html)

For more information about Keys to a Healthy Home, visit

[www.keystoahealthyhome.com](http://www.keystoahealthyhome.com)

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