

Keys to a Healthy Apartment



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You spend a lot of time in your apartment, so it makes sense to keep your place 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 six keys to a healthy apartment. It highlights some common household concerns and shows you how to deal with them before they become big problems.

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

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01 KEEP YOUR APARTMENT CLEAN

The first key to a healthy apartment is keeping it clean. Cleaning reduces dust and other irritants that can bother people with allergies and asthma. It also keeps away disease-carrying insects and rodents, a particular problem for renters in apartments.

You have a right to inspect an apartment before you move in. If you think the apartment is too dirty or repairs need to be made, ask your landlord to address the problem. Make sure you put in writing any agreement with your landlord.



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 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.

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?

- Don't allow pets on furniture or beds.
- Vacuum and dust twice a week.
- Clean litter boxes frequently and move them out of living areas.

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.



CLEANING SUPPLIES

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).

Use care with 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



GOOD IDEA

Dispose of hazardous products properly. Materials such as oil, antifreeze, paints, batteries, and products that contain mercury should be recycled at special facilities. Visit www.earth911.org to find hazardous materials recycling centers in your area, and visit www.epa.gov to learn more about hazardous household chemicals.





02

KEEP YOUR APARTMENT FREE OF CONTAMINANTS

The second key to a healthy apartment 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.

You can take some simple steps to keep your apartment safe from harmful substances, but some problems require action by your landlord, so it's important to understand all the potential dangers.



IN THE AIR

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

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 indoors.

- Your landlord should install carbon monoxide detectors within 15 feet of every sleeping area in your apartment. If your carbon monoxide detector goes off, leave the building 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.

- If you think your apartment contains exposed asbestos, ask your landlord to test it. Always leave asbestos areas undisturbed, and if asbestos needs to be removed, make sure your landlord hires a qualified asbestos-removal professional.

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

- To check for radon in your apartment, buy a radon detection kit from your local hardware store or online. Have your building manager install basement vents to remove radon from your building.

IN THE WATER

Most people get their water from a public utility that purifies it before it reaches their building. 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, or ask your landlord to test for contaminants.

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're concerned about lead, buy an inexpensive lead detection kit at a home improvement store or online. Separate kits are available to test paint and water. Tell your landlord if you detect lead.





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 building 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 doorframes, banisters, stairs, railings, porches, fences, windowsills, and walls with a damp paper towel. Throw out the towel when you're done.
- 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.
- Look for disintegrating paint chips, especially on pipes, radiators, and window frames; the more they crumble, the more lead they spread around.
- Don't scrape, sand, or burn any substance you believe may contain lead; it will only disperse the lead further.
- Stripping lead paint from pipes and old windows can be hazardous; make sure your landlord hires a contractor certified in lead-safe practices.

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



03

KEEP YOUR APARTMENT DRY

The third key to a healthy apartment is keeping it dry. Excess water causes mold, structural damage, and provides optimal conditions for some pests. Extensive water damage needs to be addressed by your landlord, but there are some easy, everyday habits you can adopt to stay healthy and prevent the need for disruptive repairs.





FOCUS ON: Mold

Mold is the common word for a fungus on wood, food, or paper. Mold has the potential to irritate human 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
- Tubs
- Sinks
- Toilets
- Drywall, insulation, or anywhere damaged by flooding

Water comes into a building 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 if 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 a bathroom with no vent.

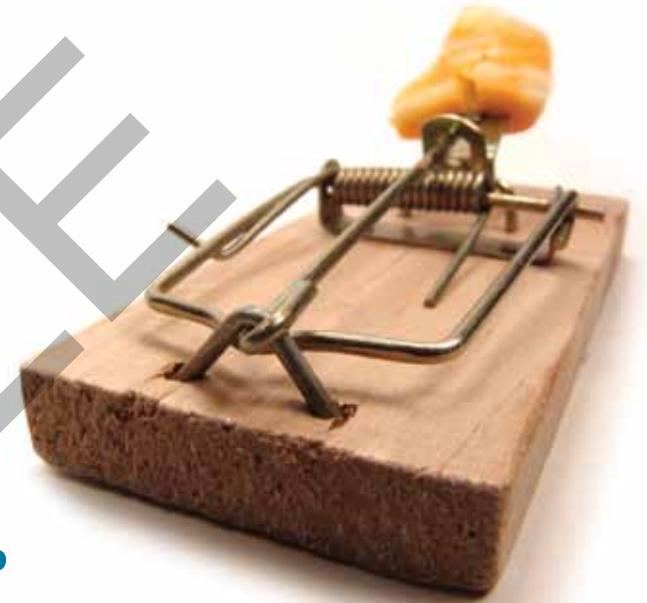


AROUND THE HOUSE

- 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.
- Clean and empty dehumidifiers. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Ask your landlord to:

- Unblock gutters and downspouts so water is diverted away from the building.
- Seal cracks in walls and gaps around windows.
- Fix leaky pipes immediately. Dripping water can cause serious damage over time.



04

KEEP YOUR APARTMENT PEST-FREE

The fourth key to a healthy apartment 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 apartment:

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

The best way to keep rodents out is to keep your home clean and clutter-free. Also, try these steps:

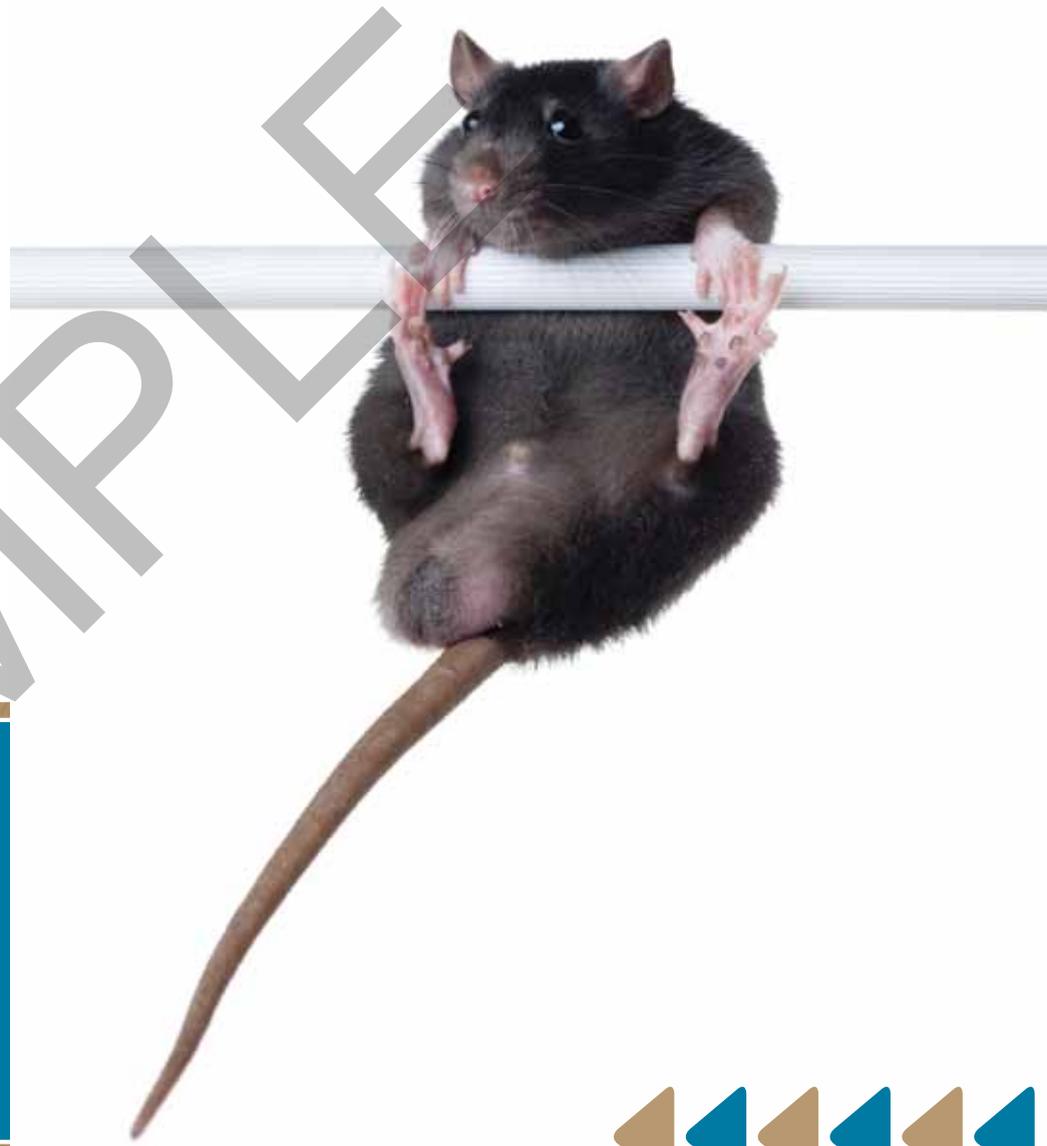
- Eliminate all water and food sources around your apartment, including bird feeders and pet dishes.

- 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.
- Set rodent traps at night and check them regularly. Otherwise, animals could learn to avoid the traps when they see other animals caught in them.



GOOD IDEA

Your landlord can help keep out pests. Ask him or her to seal exterior gaps with mortar and install weather-stripping at the bottom of all doors to the outside.



INSECTS

The most common insects you'll encounter in your home are dust mites, cockroaches, 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 can be carried into your apartment 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 the 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, ask your landlord to call an exterminator.





05

KEEP YOUR APARTMENT SAFE

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



FIRE

- Plan two escape routes from your apartment 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 space heaters away from walls, and don't leave them on when you're sleeping.
 - 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.
- In addition, your landlord should:**
- Install smoke detectors on every floor of your apartment.
 - Keep a fire extinguisher in the apartment.





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 apartment “fall-free”:

- Use nonskid mats under your rugs.
- Put a nonslip floor or mat in the tub.
- Install a grab bar in the tub and near the toilet.
- Take care when you’re carrying something that blocks your view.

Ask your landlord to repair broken steps and secure all railings and banisters.



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.

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.



06

KEEP YOUR APARTMENT WELL VENTILATED

The final key to a healthy apartment is ventilation. Adequate ventilation keeps your apartment dry and mold-free and can prevent the need for disruptive renovations down the road.



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.

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.



FOCUS ON: VOCs

Everybody knows the smell of a new car, but did you know the source of that smell could cause health problems? Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are chemicals that are released from a variety of household products, such as carpets, paints, cleaning products, aerosol sprays, and glues and adhesives.

Exposure to VOCs can cause headaches, nausea, dizziness, and ear, nose, and throat irritation. Long-term exposure to VOCs can also lead to serious health problems, including cancer.

One of the best ways to reduce your exposure to VOCs is to make 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.

Another good way to prevent harmful exposure to VOCs is to limit their presence in your home. Look for low-VOC varieties of household products, including paints and cleaning supplies.



RESOURCES

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Healthy Homes

www.cdc.gov/healthyhomes

National Center for Healthy Housing

www.nchh.org

U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission: Carbon Monoxide

www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/pubs/466.html

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

www.hud.gov/offices/lead/healthyhomes/index.cfm

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Aging Initiative

www.epa.gov/aging/resources/factsheets/index.htm

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Design for the Environment

www.epa.gov/dfe/index.htm

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: Indoor Air Quality

www.epa.gov/iaq/index.html

For more information about Keys to a Healthy Home, visit

www.keystoahealthyhome.com

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