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How Healthy Is Your Home?

By Debbie DeAngelo
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Don't worry about the dust bunnies you *can* see. Worry about the chemicals you *can't*.

Minimizing contact with chemicals and potentially harmful substances shouldn't be limited to the foods you eat, or the products used on your skin. Your home environment needs consideration too. The chemicals applied to furniture, carpeting, flame resistant clothing, dry cleaning, lawn and garden products, and many other household items can have an immediate effect on your body or can wreak havoc after long-term exposure.

Although our bodies are equipped to detoxify and eliminate these substances, the sheer number of chemicals, preservatives, and dyes can easily overwhelm our system and lead to disease. While we can't completely insulate ourselves by living in a bubble, we can make a few easy adjustments to decrease our exposure without driving ourselves crazy.

Here are five quick fixes to maintaining a healthy home.

Lose shoes at the door. The soles of your shoes serve as a blueprint of your day's journey. From public restrooms to chemically treated lawns, you're bringing everything home with you. Removing your shoes at the door prevents you from tracking in whatever you've stepped in. This becomes even more important if you have babies crawling around on the floor or kids playing on the carpet. Unless you want fertilizer in your kitchen, lead dust in the TV room and road sealant in your bedroom, ask everyone entering your home to place their shoes on a mat next to the door. Cleaning Fido's paws every time he comes in helps too.

Drive out fumes. Most people love that new car smell. Do you know why all new vehicles smell the same? It's because noxious fumes are being off gassed into the car. In fact, the first six months of a vehicle's life are a time of the most concentrated amounts of these chemicals. That's right, that highly coveted smell is a result of plastic, foam, adhesives, sealants, and fire retardants releasing fumes into the car. Some people report a sore throat, headache, eye irritation, dizziness, and nausea after purchasing a new vehicle due to inhaling these pollutants.

After purchasing a brand-new vehicle, be sure to air it out for the first six months (time sitting on the car lot counts). Keep windows open as much as possible, park in the shade (heat exacerbates off-gassing), don't use the recirculated air function, and place a new box of baking soda in your car every few weeks to absorb the gases.

Pare down plastics. Practically everything is packaged in plastic these days. Unfortunately, it can easily leach into our food. Since heat accelerates this process, try not to microwave in plastic containers or leave plastic water bottles sitting in a hot car. Other plastic sparing steps include microwaving food in glass or ceramic containers, drinking out of glass cups, decreasing reliance on bottled water, and ridding the cupboards of plastic food storage containers. Similarly, replace a few key pieces of cookware, such as a skillet and saucepan, with ones made of stainless steel or cast iron. If using non-stick pans, discard them when they become scratched, as the coating flakes into food.

Toss dryer sheets. These polyester sheets are coated with a chemical fabric softener to keep clothes feeling plush and static-free. This is accomplished by transferring a light chemical coating to your clothes. Some of the ingredients used in dryer sheets have been linked to asthma and other lung problems in otherwise healthy individuals. Scented versions carry with them dozens more chemicals used to duplicate a specific aroma. Manufactured fragrances utilize hundreds of chemicals, many of which are listed as carcinogens, hormone disruptors, and reproductive toxins. Although dryer sheets are unnecessary, many people can't imagine doing laundry without them. A few other alternatives include running white vinegar in the rinse cycle of the washing machine or buying re-usable, chemical free dryer sheets.

Clean green. Pick up any household cleaning product and read the litany of ingredients on the label. Do you recognize them? Even if you can't pronounce them, you'll be left in little doubt as to how chemically laden they are. From dish soap to furniture polish to all-purpose cleaner, we invite this toxic parade into our home on a daily basis. Fortunately, there are low-cost alternatives for highly effective cleaning agents. Buying chemical free brands is an option too but for the budget conscious, just buy the ingredients and mix them up yourself. Commonly used ingredients in DIY recipes include distilled white vinegar, liquid castile soap,

baking soda, and borax. Consult a reputable book or website for recipes to make your own non-toxic cleaning products.

Even though it's impossible to completely avoid toxic substances, simple proactive changes in your daily routine can reduce your exposure. Implementing just one of these ideas will go a long way towards increasing the health quotient of your home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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