

Homeowners: Act to increase indoor air quality this winter

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Most of us are sealing up our homes to save energy this winter. What many people do not realize is that this process also seals in hazardous indoor air pollutants that can trigger asthma, respiratory distress, headaches, fatigue and more.

Everyday items such as cleaning agents, furniture, carpet and building materials release dangerous gases such as formaldehyde and volatile organic compounds. Indoor air pollution now poses a greater health risk than the outdoor air pollution found in most areas.

Here are 10 tips for improving the air in your home so you can enjoy a safer and healthier winter.

1. If you have a gas furnace, have a heating and air-conditioning company make sure it is operating properly and not releasing dangerous levels of carbon monoxide.
2. Don't let your car run in an attached or basement garage to warm up. Instead, back it out of the garage immediately after starting it and shut the garage door so that exhaust does not enter your home.
3. Use high-quality home air filters that are effective at removing both allergens and gases. For 1-inch filters, look for ones rated MERV 7 to MERV 9 for allergens and use activated carbon and advanced compounds for gases.
4. Try turning your thermostat's fan switch to "on" instead of "auto" to continually purify your air. Even the world's greatest filter cannot trap anything if air is not flowing through it. Most fans operate independently of the energy-consuming heating and cooling parts of the system.
5. Store pesticides, paints, glues, gas cans and other chemicals outside the home when possible (but beware of freezing temperatures). Try to buy these types of products in quantities that you can use when you need it.
6. A solution of equal parts vinegar and water is safer — and in many cases more effective than — common household cleaning agents.
7. Burn unscented soy candles as an alternative to scented paraffin candles.
8. Choose wool carpet over carpet made of synthetic material. Low-emission carpet is becoming increasingly available and is another good choice.
9. Use only natural or VOC-free paint inside the home. Paints and finishes can release VOC emissions for years after application.

10. Choose furniture and cabinetry made from solid wood, not composite wood such as particleboard. Most composite wood products emit formaldehyde, a known carcinogen with no recognized safe level of exposure.

Sam McLamb is the founder of SafeHome Filters.

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