

Breathe Easy

Tips for Greener, Cleaner Indoor Air

by Lenore Weiss Baigelman

Going green is today's big buzz, with no shortage of products, technologies and services promising a healthier home and a happier life. The proliferation of green options can seem overwhelming, tempting many of us to simply ignore the entire topic. A more helpful approach is to consider why eco-friendly choices make good sense, especially in your own home.

A healthier home environment, with cleaner indoor air, is one of the most compelling reasons to embrace sustainability within your living space. Despite all the press about pollutants in the outdoor environment, the air quality inside your home can be even worse. According to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), the average American spends 90 percent of their time indoors, where levels of pollutants may run two to five times higher than those found in outdoor air. It's important to be aware of the number and types of contaminants inside your home and learn how you can reduce them.

Volatile organic compounds (VOCs), found in building materials and common household products such as paint, cleaning supplies, pesticides, carpets, drapes and furnishings, are primary indoor pollutants that release potentially harmful gases into the air. Their adverse effects on individuals vary, based upon personal health and the level of VOC exposure, but the Environmental Protection Agency notes links with respiratory disorders, such as asthma, and even more serious illnesses, like cancer. Other indoor air pollutants, such as mold or smoke, can also wreak havoc upon your health.

Short of leaving your house, pitching a tent or sailing off into the sunset, a variety of easily accomplished controls that improve indoor air quality can be incorporated into your daily routine. The USGBC suggests a three-pronged approach: source removal, source control, and dilution.

SOURCE REMOVAL

KEEP TOXINS OUT OF THE HOME.

- Enforce a no-smoking policy
- Choose low-toxic cleaning products
- When decorating or remodeling:
 - Choose formaldehyde-free cabinets, furniture and building products
 - Use zero- or very low-VOC paints, sealants and adhesives
 - Install finishes that are naturally easy to clean and maintain, such as wood or tile
 - Choose "Green Label Plus" certified carpet

SOURCE CONTROL

IDENTIFY AND REMOVE THE POLLUTANTS ALREADY IN THE HOME.

- Filter the supply air to the HVAC system to remove particulates that would otherwise be continuously recirculated
- Establish a regular maintenance schedule to change furnace filters and to inspect and clean ventilation system filters, exhaust fans, vents and dehumidifiers
- Protect HVAC systems during any kind of construction

DILUTION

USE FRESH OUTSIDE AIR TO VENTILATE AND EXHAUST POLLUTANTS TO THE OUTDOORS. (This also helps control moisture and potential mold.)

- Open windows located on opposite walls to provide natural cross-ventilation
- Install a whole-house ventilation system or attic fan to help flush out stale air
- Regularly use kitchen and bathroom fans ducted directly outdoors (not to the attic) to reduce cooking fumes and moisture



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Implementing these strategies to improve indoor air quality is not an all-or-nothing proposition; you can reap benefits simply by adopting the best practices you can, when you can. Even if that means just cracking open a window more frequently to welcome in fresh air, you are taking a positive step toward a healthier home and a healthier you!

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