

# It's In the Air

We worry about outdoor air quality, but the nastiest pollutants are right under our noses—and in our homes.

“The average person spends as much as 90 percent of their time indoors,” explains Matt Marcum, environmental programs coordinator at the American Lung Association of Illinois. “And EPA studies have shown that indoor air pollution levels can often be 2 to 5 times higher than outdoor levels.”

Those indoor air pollutants don't just affect the air you breathe. They can cause health consequences too. Many people suffer from eye, nose, and throat irritation and headaches as a result of indoor air pollution—and in some cases, the effects can be even more serious. Studies have linked chemicals found indoors to increased rates of allergies, asthma, birth defects, learning disabilities in children, and even cancer.

Fortunately, you can easily improve your home's air quality. The first step is recognizing the most common culprits. “Once you break it down into these categories, it's easier to identify what may be a problem in your house,” Marcum explains. “It gives you a place to start.” Now that's a breath of fresh air.

## The Culprits

These three main types of indoor air pollutants are found all over your home—and working to minimize them should be your first priority, according to Marcum.

You don't necessarily have to throw out an item that contains these pollutants, Marcum says, unless you're sure it's the source of your irritation. But identifying the most common pollutants can help you take steps to reduce exposure.

### Biological

Items such as dust, mold, pollen, and pet dander are biological pollutants that can irritate asthma and may cause breathing problems, shortness of breath, dizziness, and even fever. “These generally come from unchecked moisture sources like wet carpets and floors,” Marcum explains. Household pets and poorly maintained humidifiers, dehumidifiers, and air conditioners also may increase biological pollution.

### Particulate

Particles in the air—typically a mixture of solids and liquid droplets—can be inhaled

through the nose and mouth and get deep in the lungs, causing respiratory irritation, infections, and even in some instances lung cancer. The amount of particulate pollution in your home probably isn't enough to cause serious health problems, Marcum says, but the particles produced by fireplaces and wood-burning stoves can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation.

### Chemical

The presence of major chemical pollutants in your home, including carbon monoxide and radon, should be monitored closely. Seek out other lesser-known chemical pollutants lurking throughout your house too—they may cause headaches, nausea, skin irritation, and other more serious ailments. Phthalates—commonly found in air fresheners, dryer sheets, cleaning supplies, and other products that include fragrances—off-gas slowly and can stick to household dust, which is then inhaled and ingested. Formaldehyde and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs) such as toluene, benzene, and ammonia are respiratory irritants emitted from synthetic carpets, paint, and the glues used in pressed-wood furnishings. Avoid purchasing products that contain these items.

## Easy Ways to Improve Air Quality

- Vacuum and dust weekly
- Open windows regularly to increase airflow
- Run exhaust fans to remove contaminants and increase ventilation
- Replace furnace filters regularly
- Control moisture in the warm months with a dehumidifier and particulate matter in the cold months with a humidifier
- Maintain ventilation systems, dehumidifiers, humidifiers, and air conditioners
- Use varnishes with low or no VOCs and only apply them in well-ventilated areas
- Avoid using aerosol products
- Clean the house with natural, rather than chemical-based, cleaning supplies
- Don't allow smoking indoors
- Place low-maintenance plants such as peace lilies, bamboo palm, and gerbera daisies around your house—they remove common indoor pollutants from the air

try this today—

**Take off your shoes. Remove shoes immediately upon entering your house (and ask guests to do the same) to keep out dirt, dust, and particles that might otherwise get tracked through your house.**