

Cleaning Up Our Inside Air

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Did you know that the Environmental Protection Agency ranks indoor air pollution among the top environmental health risks? In one frequently cited study, the EPA estimated that inside air is two to five times more polluted than outside air.

Today's modern buildings—including houses of worship—have tight construction, great for energy efficiency but not for ventilation. Some inside pollution occurs naturally—dust mites, pet dander, the dirt on our shoes. However, another cause of indoor pollution comes from human-made substances called volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, which can be irritating or even deadly. Reducing outside air pollution benefits us and the planet, and so does reducing our use of and exposure to these chemicals that pollute indoor air.

Thousands of products contain VOCs, usually in the form of adhesives, perfumes, and solvents. When they evaporate into the air, or “off-gas,” they release chemicals that our bodies inhale or absorb. Sometimes they produce an odor or a sensation, such as that “new car” smell, the fruity scent of shampoo, the stinging in your eyes from the bathtub mildew remover, or the sudden headache or cough from exposure to a paint stripper. Sometimes they go undetected. New carpet, building materials, adhesives, paints, stains, particleboard, pesticides, printers, air fresheners, and cleaning products all off-gas VOCs.

I'm taking steps to “de-VOC” my home, trying to reduce my family's exposure to these chemicals by removing harsher substances and buying

products made with natural ingredients. For instance, I've been inventorying the chemicals in our basement and garage and taking some of them to the local Solid Waste District Recycle Depot for safe disposal; my facility's website has a convenient list of the substances that are truly hazardous and those that can be discarded in regular trash. Others I've tightly sealed and stored. Two VOCs, found in many solutions you may have in your garage, are particularly unsafe: methylene chloride, carcinogenic to animals, is used in paint strippers, adhesive removers, and aerosol spray paints and can be converted to carbon monoxide; and benzene, found in tobacco products, paints, stored fuels, and car emissions, causes cancer in humans.

Home and hardware stores are beginning to stock products labeled “low VOCs” or “zero VOCs.” When painting my basement, I used Sherwin-Williams's Harmony paint, which carries the company's own “green seal” right on the label. Eartheasy.com has a comprehensive guide to non-toxic, zero or low-VOC products at http://eartheasy.com/live_nontoxic_paints.htm.

I've been inventorying our household cleaners, too. If a cleaning product carries a warning label, it most likely off-gases VOCs. Most homes don't need harsh chemicals for basic cleaning, and a clean house doesn't need heavy perfumes. I keep Borax, washing soda, mild dish soap, and white vinegar around for most of my cleaning chores. Plain club soda cleans my windows and mirrors. Instead of artificially scented candles for olfacto-

ry atmosphere, I simmer cinnamon on the stove or add essential oils to my homemade cleaning solutions. Health food stores carry essential oils, as do many online sources.

Simply opening windows improves inside air, a good idea when you're using VOC-containing products indoors. I also have our ventilation system checked annually. Your contractor can tell you how to maintain your furnace and air conditioning unit year-round for best air quality. Many homeowners don't know how to maintain one of the biggest investments in their home.

Promoting health and clean air means limiting our exposure to volatile organic compounds at home and at work. Trustees and church administrators should be aware of VOCs in church buildings, especially with the increasing rates of asthma and allergies triggered by pollution. More and more, we consumers have the choice to purchase low-VOC products, and how we spend our money is a vote for cleaner air. We have the power—let's use it! We'll all breathe easier. ■

For more information about indoor air quality, check these resources:

Visit the EPA's website at www.epa.gov/iaq/ for comprehensive information on air quality in homes, schools, and other public buildings, as well as information on asthma and allergies, using air purifiers, and “sick building syndrome.”

To find eco-friendly cleaners, paints, paper products, and other household supplies, check out www.green seal.org.

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