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5 ways your home decor can make you sick

Your spring allergy symptoms could be a result of your home's poor air quality.

By **Shawna Hampton, Local Correspondent**

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FLOORED: Your carpet might harbor dust, allergens and even chemicals that are making you sick. (Photo: Andrew Morrell Photography/Flickr)

Ah, the smell of a new home, new furniture, new carpeting ... even a freshly painted room! It's always fun to reinvent your decor or refresh what you already have, especially in the spring when we all catch spring-cleaning fever.

But don't breathe in that new smell too deeply, unless you enjoy itching eyes, sneezing, coughing, wheezing, headaches, dizziness and even potential future illness like heart disease or cancer. What you might mistake for normal spring allergies could be a reaction to chemicals off-gassing from common interior furnishings and finishes, either newly made or items that have been with you a while.

According to the EPA:

"On average, we spend about 90 percent of our time indoors, where pollutant levels are often higher than those outside. Indoor pollution is estimated to cause thousands of cancer deaths and hundreds of thousands of respiratory health problems each year. In addition, hundreds of thousands of children have experienced elevated blood lead levels resulting from their exposure to indoor pollutants."

Here are five of the worst offending items that contribute to indoor air pollution and could be making you sick, now or in the future:

1. Furniture

Most furniture is made of wood. Even upholstered pieces like sofas or that comfy recliner you spend so much time on have wood frames under the padding and fabric. Those frames are usually (especially in budget furniture) held together by glues and adhesives, and nearly all furniture is finished to protect from wear and tear.

Those glues, adhesives and finishes can contain formaldehyde and other volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that are released into the air over time and use. Formaldehyde can cause watery and burning eyes, nausea, can trigger asthma attacks and can bring on a slew of other reactions. High concentrations of formaldehyde can be found in anything containing pressed wood products (particleboard, fiberboard, MDF, etc.) that is held together with urea-formaldehyde (UF) adhesives. (Hint: You're most likely to find pressed wood in cheap, some-assembly-required furniture that you order online or pick up from an average department store.)

In upholstery, those comfy cushions can sometimes be treated with fire-retardants that, while great for preventing your sofa from becoming a quickly-burning torch, can accumulate in your blood and could cause birth defects and cancer.

2. Fabrics

Those gorgeous new curtains look great hanging in your living room and they were a bargain at Target. And — BONUS! They're guaranteed not to wrinkle! And that new sofa? Covered in stain-proof polyester. Do your worst, Fido!

Hold the phone and think about this: While synthetic (i.e. man-made) fibers are durable, colorfast and wrinkle-resistant, they're also made of thermoplastics derived from petroleum. And 99.9 percent of the time, the ingredients that give fabrics those "special qualities" to resist stains and wrinkles are loads of nasty chemicals applied during the finishing process, including perfluorochemicals (PFCs), a.k.a. Teflon. [As the](#)

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[EPA reports](#), PFCs accumulate in the blood over time and can be found in common household dust. No one seems to understand the potential health hazards of PFC accumulation, but the ick factor of having unwanted chemicals in my blood seems like a bad idea.

Blends and strictly natural fibers don't escape completely, though. Polyester-cotton blends are often treated with formaldehyde and possibly softened with ammonia. And that bright, vibrant fuchsia color you love so much? According to New York Times bestseller "[The Healthy Home](#)" by Dr. Myron Wentz and his son David, many textile dyes contain toxic heavy metals like cadmium and chromium.

3. Paint and wallcoverings

There's a reason why pregnant women are discouraged from painting a room. Standard paints, especially oil-based products, contain lots of hazardous chemicals and VOCs. We've all smelled that great aroma from a newly painted room that lingers for days. As paint dries, the solvent that makes it wet and spreadable evaporates into the air, releasing those chemicals into our environment. Even after paint is dry, these chemicals linger, and if a wall is sanded, chipped or otherwise disturbed, that paint is transferred into our everyday household dust that can be breathed in with every inhalation. Potential health effects? Headaches and dizziness, for starters, all the way up to being a possible carcinogen.

Plastic-coated wallpaper and vinyl wallcoverings are enjoying renewed popularity because they're easy to clean and last a long time. However, PVC vinyl contains phthalates which interrupt the endocrine system. That wonderful plastic coating can also trap moisture, which might lead to mold.

4. Carpet

Like paint, new carpet can sometimes give off a distinctive smell. Also like paint, that smell is not a good thing, because it means chemicals used in manufacturing and treating the finished carpet for stain resistance and fire prevention are being released into your air. In addition, the adhesives used to adhere the padding to the subfloor, or the carpet to the padding in some cases, can be a toxic stew of nasty chemicals. The same kinds of flame retardants found in upholstery are applied to carpet padding and those particles can work their way up through the porous carpet to contribute to off-gassing.

In addition, carpet by its nature traps household dust and allergens and anything you bring into the house on the bottom of your shoes. This gunk is released back into the air when you walk on the carpet. And, really, how often are we vacuuming all this stuff up and out of the carpet? Is it twice a week or more, with a HEPA-filtered vacuum? Most of us don't have that kind of time.

5. Cabinetry

Let's face it: kitchen remodels are expensive undertakings and if you've ever priced out replacing your aging cabinetry, you know what sticker shock feels like. But, before you're tempted by that plain-Jane stock cabinetry down at The Home Depot (and even some custom cabinets from more upscale sources), be aware that more than likely it's made with MDF and/or particleboard.

Conventional MDF/particleboard made with UF (see furniture above) binders is more susceptible to moisture and high humidity, which can cause the material to break down and decompose into the air, releasing our good friend formaldehyde.

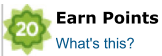
Next steps

Keep in mind that we're only starting to scratch the surface in terms of research into toxic substances and products in the home. [The EPA puts it this way](#):

"While pollutants commonly found in indoor air are responsible for many harmful effects, there is considerable uncertainty about what concentrations or periods of exposure are necessary to produce specific health problems. People also react very differently to exposure to indoor air pollutants. Further research is needed to better understand which health effects occur after exposure to the average pollutant concentrations found in homes and which occurs from the higher concentrations that occur for short periods of time."

There is hope, however, as more people and companies become aware of what affects indoor air quality and as they take steps to mitigate the issues and make products safer. And, of course, there are alternatives and products available that improve or at least do not contribute to unhealthy indoor air. I'll talk about those in my next post.

Also on MNN: [15 houseplants for improving indoor air quality](#)



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