Life is risky. But while you can’t avoid every hazard thrown in your path, you can try to create a wholesome nest for yourself and your family—pets included. It starts by blocking certain nasties at the front door, including pollen, pesticides, noxious solvents, and disease-carrying creepy crawlies. Indoors, you want to prevent mold, bacteria, and viruses from taking hold, and minimize allergy-provoking animal dander and dust mites. Making your home healthier can involve simple remedies, such as opening a window to let in a blast of fresh air, and more lasting solutions, like moving away from paints, furnishings, and cleaning products that throw off chemical vapors.

To get the lowdown on the best actions for you to take right now—and some to consider down the road—we canvassed health and environmental experts across the country. Here, our best advice for cleaning up your household.

Hassle-Free Steps to a Healthier Home

Our room-by-room guide will have you breathing easier in no time

Life is risky. But while you can’t avoid every hazard thrown in your path, you can try to create a wholesome nest for yourself and your family—pets included. It starts by blocking certain nasties at the front door, including pollen, pesticides, noxious solvents, and disease-carrying creepy crawlies. Indoors, you want to prevent mold, bacteria, and viruses from taking hold, and minimize allergy-provoking animal dander and dust mites. Making your home healthier can involve simple remedies, such as opening a window to let in a blast of fresh air, and more lasting solutions, like moving away from paints, furnishings, and cleaning products that throw off chemical vapors.

To get the lowdown on the best actions for you to take right now—and some to consider down the road—we canvassed health and environmental experts across the country. Here, our best advice for cleaning up your household.

Entryways

Right Now:

1. Keep pollen out. During hay fever season, shake or brush off outerwear, and keep a brush and wet wipes handy to clean pets’ fur and feet. Don’t hang laundry on outdoor clothes lines at least for now.

2. Add mats on both sides of the door. Up to 80 percent of the dirt that gets tracked inside—along with countless allergens, bacteria, and lawn chemicals—can be caught with a double length of washable matting before it makes itself at home. Shown here: Waterhog mats, which can be hosed down (from $40; plowhearth.com).

3. Air out dry cleaning. Take off plastic bags before you come inside so that any residual perchloroethylene, a common dry-cleaning solvent and suspected carcinogen, can evaporate. If your dry cleaning has a strong chemical odor when you pick it up, give it back and ask that it be properly dried. Or Google “organic dry cleaning” to find a perc-free service near you.

Maybe Later:

4. Establish a no-shoes indoors policy. Keep a basket of slippers at the door for family and guests alike.

5. Install vent fans in crawl spaces. Keeping humidity levels in these areas below 50 percent prevents condensation and the spread of musty odors and mold and mildew, which can trigger allergies and asthma. Find fan models that work for crawl-space ventilation at tjernlund.com.

6. Create a pet checkpoint. Treat cats and dogs with a monthly tick- and flea-medication, and use a fine-tooth comb (from $4; petco.com) to catch fleas before they come inside. Flea shampoos and collars contain pesticides, which can rub off on kids and furnishings.

by Deborah Baldwin

Photographs by Matthew Benson

THISOLDHOUSE.COM April 2010

74
Kitchen/Pantry

RIGHT NOW:
7 Caulk holes and crevices so that disease-carrying mice and insects won’t come looking for a free lunch.
8 Filter your drinking water. Activated carbon filters—whether a pitcher, tap-mounted, or under-sink model—can cut levels of lead, chlorine, and other contaminants. Request a copy of your municipality’s annual water quality test or use an at-home test kit, such as Watersafe’s City Water Test Kit ($20; discoveringtest.com), to check it yourself. Shown here: Pur’s 2 Stage pitcher, whose maker says it even filters out atrazine, a weed killer.
9 Change fridge filters before their expiration date. If your refrigerator comes with a water dispenser, change the filter every six months, before sediment buildup starts to overwhelm it.
10 Eliminate BPA-containing plastic containers that could leach the chemical—a suspected health hazard, especially for kids—into food or drink. Toss containers that have the number 3, 6, or 7 on the bottom; go to rubbermaid.com or tupperware.com for info on their products.
11 Toss cracked cutting boards. Opt for ones made of maple or a hard plastic so that germs don’t have a place to hide.
12 Clean prep surfaces regularly. Scrub those cutting boards with hot, soapy water after each use.
13 Use your range-hood fan when you cook. It’ll reduce cooking-related air pollutants, including carbon monoxide and nitrogen dioxide, and will lower humidity, which can encourage bacteria and mold. Before the gunk builds up on the filter, clean or replace it.
14 Let plates and silverware dry thoroughly to discourage bacteria—and wash your hands before putting them away.

MAYBE LATER:
15 Swap out a recirculating vent fan for one that vents outdoors so that pollutants and odors can make a clean exit.
16 Opt for a copper sink or counter. The metal is naturally antimicrobial.
17 Seal stone counters and cracked tiles with a product low in VOCs.

Living Room

RIGHT NOW:
18 Ban smoking. It’s a fast, effective way to cut indoor air pollution.
19 Open a window (unless you’re fighting pollen). Indoor air can contain two to five times more chemical pollutants than outdoor air.
20 Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter. High-efficiency particulate air filters are best for sucking up dust, dust mites (and their allergy-aggravating droppings), animal dander, and fleas. Use a crevice tool on upholstery and a brush attachment on dust-catching curtains and lamp shades. Find some good HEPA vacs on page 27.
21 Put up a plant or two. Spider plants, peace lilies, philodendrons, and aloe vera can help neutralize formaldehyde (found in furniture) and benzene (found in car fumes and paint supplies). Snake plants, English ivy, Boston and asparagus ferns, and Areca and bamboo palms are good neutralizers too.
22 Clean hardwood floors often. The metal is naturally antimicrobial.
23 Sanitize handheld devices. Cordless phones, TV remotes—even computer keyboards—may harbor more bacteria than a toilet seat.
24 Hire a chimney sweep, today. Regular fireplace and chimney maintenance helps lower airborne particulates and carbon monoxide emissions. Before sweeping up yourself, dampen ashes so that they won’t fly around the room.

MAYBE LATER:
25 Invest in a central vacuum system. Opt for one that vents to the outdoors for optimal removal of dust and allergens.
26 Buy an air purifier. While hardy a panacea, the new generation of purifiers can help control dust and allergens. Find buying guidelines at achacergency.com.
27 Loosen grime with steam. Steam appliances, such as Haan’s Steam Cleaning Floor Sanitizer ($100; buyhaiann.com), rely on water alone.
28 Shop for finishes and furniture that are low- or no-VOC and formaldehyde-free. These hazardous chemicals can take up to three years to off-gas. Shown here: Benjamin Moore’s no-VOC Natura ($35 per gallon; all paint colors).
29 Invest in machine-washable curtains. Keeping them dust- and allergen-free will be that much easier.
30 Replace firewood. Logs made of coffee grounds or wood fiber and wax produce fewer particulates and less carbon monoxide than wood does. You can also reduce emissions by converting a fireplace to natural gas.

Bathroom

RIGHT NOW:
31 Replace failing caulk and cracked tiles to discourage mold from growing behind the walls. For how-to advice on fixing both, go to thisoldhouse.com.
32 Dehumidify. Run your ceiling vent fan after every shower. Install a switch timer to make sure it runs at least 20 minutes to vent moist, mildew-attracting air outside.
33 Avoid using cleansers with ammonia and chlorine (and never, ever mix them). These irritate skin and lungs, and even provoke asthma.
34 Sanitize faucets, where germs and flu viruses collect fast. Wipe them down with a 3 percent hydrogen peroxide solution or try wipes that use plant oils to kill germs and viruses, such as EPA-certified Seventh Generation Disinfecting Wipes ($5.75; sevengenerations.com).

MAYBE LATER:
35 Swap out vinyl shower curtains for washable nylon or polyester ones. Vinyl can contain phthalates, which may be hazardous to reproductive health. Similar to shown here: Nyron Hotel Shower Curtain ($20; buyrubbermaid.com).

Playroom/Kid’s room

RIGHT NOW:
36 Avoid chemical grout cleaners. Make a paste of baking soda and hydrogen peroxide instead, and let it sit on grout for 30 minutes before scrubbing and rinsing.
37 Install a whole-house water filter to reduce exposure to airborne chlorine while you’re showering. Or try a filtered showerhead, such as Aquasana’s Shower Filtration System ($85; aquasana.com).
38 Vacuum, dust, and damp mop regularly. This will wipe out dust bunnies that can carry flame-retardant residue from electronic equipment, carpet backing, foam rubber, and other furnishings. Kids are especially vulnerable because...
40. Install linoleum, cork, tile, wood, or stone in place of carpets and vinyl flooring. Unlike vinyl, these natural materials contain no phthalates, and linoleum inhibits bacterial growth. All collect less dust than carpeting does. Show here: Marmoleum Click linoleum tiles ($7–$9 per square foot; foroflooring.com).

41. Avoid furnishings and clothing with stain-resistant coatings that contain perfluorochemicals. Questions have been raised about their safety.

Laundry/Per area

RIGHT NOW:

44. Decent kidble into sealed containers to keep vermin at bay. Similar to shown here: 21-cup Modular Canister ($6; rubbermaid.com).

45. Opt for paper- or plant-based kitty litter. Litter that contains dust-creating silica may be harmful to pets and people when inhaled.

46. Nip fleas naturally. Launder your pet’s bedding regularly in hot water. Take it to a commercial laundry if your machine can’t handle the bulk.

47. Make sure your clothes dryer vents outdoors so that moisture won’t build up indoors and encourage mildew.

48. Wash sheets, duvet covers, and bedspreads once a week in hot water. Take it to a commercial laundry if your machine can’t handle the bulk.

49. Wash your hands after loading the machine, especially when anyone in the house is sick, so that you don’t catch (and spread) germs.

50. Upgrade to a steam washer. Look for an NSF-certified model able to zap germs and allergens with high-temperature steam heat.

51. Let your bed air out before you make it each day. This will allow mite-friendly moisture to evaporate. Airing out your pillows and vacuuming the mattress will help control mites too.

52. Screen out pollen. If you have a window air conditioner, use the fan setting, and change or wash the filter often. Keep windows closed.

53. Stop using moth balls. Period. They contain possible carcinogens. Store clean silks and woolens in zip-up bags. Buy cedar chips from a pet store, and make your own sachets by wrapping them in cheesecloth; toss or refill when they lose their scent.

54. Avoid placing office equipment on your bed. Copiers and printers can generate lung irritants.

55. Put in a whole-house fan. Installed in the attic or under the roof, this low-tech cooling system draws poor-quality air out and fresh air in (a boon when it’s not pollen season).

56. Zip dust-proof covers on pillows and mattresses to keep mites out.

57. Swap out wall-to-wall carpet for hardwood and washable area rugs, steps that will help reduce the buildup of dust, pet dander, and other allergens.

58. Replace your mattress with one free of flame retardants. Some mattresses incorporate wool, which is naturally flame resistant.

59. Set up a humidity monitor. Aim for a humidity level of 40 to 50 percent; a higher level can trigger the growth of mildew and mites. If levels fall below 20 percent, consider a plug-in humidifier—and follow the manufacturer’s care tips. Shown here: EnviraCare’s HealthCheck Monitor ($13; alieygybone.com).

56. Zip dust-proof covers on pillows and water heaters are properly venting carbon monoxide.

57. Upgrade your workshop’s dust collection system. A HEPA-filter shop vac that screws right onto the ports of power saws and sanders greatly reduces airborne dust.

58. Swap gas-powered lawn gear for quieter, fume-free electric and manual options. Fisker’s new Momentum reel mower ($200; lowes.com) has scissors-like blades that churn out mulch-size clippings. The bottom line: You can have a well-kept home and take care of your health too.

59. Electrically charged pleated filters do a particularly good job of removing allergens. For more on these filters, see page 96. Shown here: Accumulair Diamond ($16; filters-now.com).

53. Avoid air fresheners, which may mask mildew odors with fragrance-bearing phthalates and may contain VOCs as well.

54. Install a dehumidifier to keep humidity below mold-triggering levels.

60. Check for radon. This odorless natural gas is the second-leading cause of lung cancer after smoking. Use a test kit, like RTCA’s 4-Pass Charcoal Canister Test ($22; rtca.com), to measure levels every few years and after any basement work.

61. Schedule an HVAC checkup to make sure furnaces, boilers, and air filters are functioning properly. For more on these filters, see page 96. Shown here: Accumulair Diamond ($16; filters-now.com).

62. If you own a sump pump, make sure its working properly so that mold-inducing moisture won’t build up.

63. Check for flaking asbestos around pipes and boilers. Call in an expert if you suspect it’s present.

64. Check for asbestos. This odorless natural gas is the second-leading cause of lung cancer after smoking. Use a test kit, like RTCA’s 4-Pass Charcoal Canister Test ($22; rtca.com), to measure levels every few years and after any basement work.

65. Install air fresheners, which may mask mildew odors with fragrance-bearing phthalates and may contain VOCs as well.

66. Make sure your clothes dryer vents outdoors so that moisture won’t build up indoors and encourage mildew.

67. Check for flaking asbestos around pipes and boilers. Call in an expert if you suspect it’s present.

68. Avoid air fresheners, which may mask mildew odors with fragrance-bearing phthalates and may contain VOCs as well.

69. If you own a sump pump, make sure its working properly so that mold-inducing moisture won’t build up.

70. Switch to organic lawn care. Lawn chemicals may green up the grass fast, but they ultimately weaken its defenses against drought and disease. Runoff is a major source of pollution in rivers and lakes—which helps explain how contraceptives and weed killers can end up in your drinking water. Find a natural lawn-care starter kit on page 22.

71. Upgrade your workshop’s dust collection system. A HEPA-filter shop vac that screws right onto the ports of power saws and sanders greatly reduces airborne dust.

72. Swap gas-powered lawn gear for quieter, fume-free electric and manual options. Fisker’s new Momentum reel mower ($200; lowes.com) has scissors-like blades that churn out mulch-size clippings. The bottom line: You can have a well-kept home and take care of your health too.