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DWELL-BEING

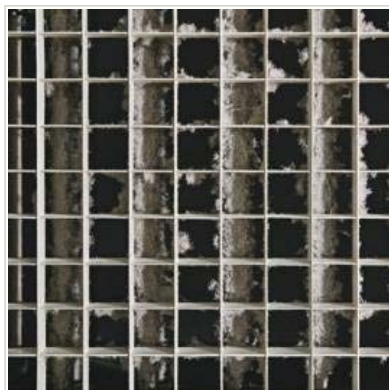
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IS YOUR HOUSE MAKING YOU UNWELL? OUR EXPERTS OFFER PRACTICAL PRESCRIPTIONS FOR A HEALTHIER HOME - AND A HEALTHIER YOU.

A man's home is his castle. But what if yours is a haven for harmful chemicals, mold, fungi, bacteria and other things that make you go ewww? It's enough to make you lower the drawbridge and make a run for it.

Relax, improving your home's health needn't sound so drastic. Whether it's time to address surface issues such as carpet and paint, or delve into your home's deep, dark corners, Valley business owners offer advice on how and why to clean up your act.



The National Air Duct Cleaners Association recommends cleaning ducts every two years. Prior to occupancy, buyers of new homes should also schedule a cleaning to remove dust and debris that accumulated during construction.

Get your ducts in a row

In Phoenix, high-pollution advisories tell us what to expect when we're outside. But if you need to enforce air quality standards on the inside, cleaning your HVAC's duct work is a good start. This goes double for smokers and pet owners or those with breathing difficulties, allergies or frequent colds.

"Duct cleaning helps with cold germs, spores, Valley Fever and allergies, and it restores your unit's efficiency," says Sharon Altenhoff, owner of Air Quality Specialists, Inc. in Glendale. The National Air Duct Cleaners Association recommends cleaning ducts every two years. Prior to occupancy, buyers of new homes should also schedule a cleaning to remove dust and debris that accumulated during construction.

When selecting an air duct cleaning company, Altenhoff recommends two things: Find one that is NADCA-certified, and find one trained in ventilation systems mold remediation in case your contractor encounters the M-word.

Don't be shy about asking your contractor to help you conduct a visual inspection – using a mirror and flashlight or remote camera – during or after the cleaning. And homeowners with rooftop A/C units will want to ask contractors to check for pigeon droppings or even roof rats.

Paint the house 'green'

When it comes to indoor air quality, paint is a big offender. Who hasn't walked into a freshly painted house and been overwhelmed – possibly to the point of headache or nausea – by fumes?

Many commercially available paints contain VOCs, or Volatile Organic Compounds. VOCs are emitted as gases, stemming from the use of formaldehyde, ammonias, butyls or other chemicals in paint manufacturing. VOCs can lead to eye, nose and throat irritation, headaches, loss of concentration, nausea and even damage to the liver, kidney and central nervous system, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

When choosing paint, experts agree that "zero-VOC paint" is the way to go. And Gerard Windstein, president and founder of Phoenix-based EcoClean, says zero-VOC paints no longer limit you in color. "The trick is finding a company that mixes zero-VOC tint," he says.



It'll cost you. A gallon of zero-VOC semi-gloss paint at EcoClean starts at \$43.95 a gallon. Then again, not applying zero-VOC paint could cost you as well. "The state of California did testing and found that some paints emit VOCs for as long as 200 days. So, during those 200 days you're going to live and sleep in an environment that is permeated with VOCs," Windstein says.



Many experts agree that when it comes to carpet cleaning, the fewer chemicals the better. Do your research on what to avoid by visiting epa.gov.

Clean carpeting

If you see home interiors in shades of green, Windstein suggests that wool carpet is an environmentally healthy "deep green." "The only 100 percent safe carpet out there is 100 percent wool carpet with hemp or jute backing. It's 100 percent natural and there are no chemicals in the material," he says.

Next best options? "Wool with synthetic backing would be 'lighter green.' And nylon carpeting with no scotchguard and no flame retardant is safe," he says, adding that natural hard floors such as bamboo, cork and hardwood will up your home's health quotient too. As for hypoallergenic carpets, Windstein urges consumers to do their homework. "Hypoallergenic carpeting means that it was sprayed with a chemical to kill mold. You won't have mold, but now you'll have the chemical – and you need to find out what that is," he says.

Cleaning carpeting regularly – even if it looks clean – is also important. "Your carpet is a sinkhole for the toxic materials you bring into

your house. These materials become a hazardous part of house dust and settle into the carpet," Windstein says. In fact, the EPA estimates that levels of about a dozen common organic pollutants are two to five times higher inside homes than outside.

Many experts agree that when it comes to carpet cleaning, the fewer chemicals the better. Do your research on what to avoid by visiting epa.gov, then ask your carpet cleaning contractor questions about the products they use.



"Since we live in the desert, people have this misconception that if they have a water leak, it will dry up and they won't have a problem.... Mold can take down a home faster than termites."

— Jeanette Kurtz, executive vice president of Global Prevention Services

Prevent mold

Think mold won't strike in dry Arizona? "People are shocked when they learn that Arizona is one of the top states in the nation for mold problems," says Jeanette Kurtz, executive vice president of Global Prevention Services, a Scottsdale-based mold remediation company with nine locations nationwide. "Since we live in the desert, people have this misconception that if they have a water leak, it will dry up and they won't have a problem."

Promptly drying water leaks and spills can go a long way toward preventing mold. Homeowners should also check landscaping grades. Over time, erosion and hard rains can cause water to pool against your house instead of flowing away from it.

If you do suspect mold, find a remediation expert. "Mold can take down a home faster than termites," Kurtz warns, urging consumers to ask mold remediation contractors these questions:

- Are you licensed, bonded and insured?
- If the mold comes back, will you come back? At what cost?
- Can I have a copy of your warranty in writing –

before you begin work?

- Do you have specific training and/or certification for mold removal?

"This is one of those services not to skimp on," Kurtz says, adding that if left unaddressed, mold can lead to respiratory, allergy, immune, hair and skin problems.

Check your chimney

If your home has a fireplace and you use it, your eco-minded neighbors may already be fuming mad that you're adding to air pollution. You'll have to take that up with them. On the inside, however, protect your family's health and safety by hiring a chimney sweep. You'll reduce your risk for chimney and house fires by removing the flammable buildup of creosote in your chimney.

"You can also get into health issues. If people have asthma, any respiratory illness or are very sensitive to smoke and smell, chimney sweeping is a must," says Mark Keever, owner/operator of Adirondack Chimney Sweep in Phoenix. The EPA also reports that blocked or leaking chimneys or flues can release fatal indoor concentrations of the odorless gas carbon monoxide.

Since the Valley's burn season is short

– both due to temperate winters and Maricopa County-mandated no-burn days

– Keever suggests hiring a chimney sweep every three years. He also urges the burning of harder woods such as pecan, mesquite and oak. "The harder the wood, the hotter the fire. And the hotter the fire, the cleaner it burns," he says.

Everyday difference-makers

Maintaining a healthy home isn't all about big purchases and annual maintenance schedules. There are everyday things you can do to improve indoor air quality. Here's a starter list.

Air Fresheners: If you're trying to cover up a bad smell, go for the source. "Air fresheners just mask smells," says Derrick Denis, CIAQP, CIEC, and national board member and Phoenix chapter director for the Indoor Air Quality Association. If you need to freshen the air, bypass synthetic air fresheners in favor of opening windows or simmering spices like cinnamon or cloves.



Vents: Remove vent registers and furnace filter covers and wipe them down to prevent dust from collecting and re-circulating.

Air filters: Replace them every 30 to 90 days, but don't assume that's enough to clean your air. "People have a misconception that air conditioning filters improve air quality. They do not. They catch the big stuff, which keeps debris out of your machine," Denis says.

Clean your casa: "Air filters only capture what's in the air. If you have an inch of dust on the cabinets above the refrigerator, the best filter in the world can't get that," Denis says. His advice? "Clean your house." A simple wet rag, mop and vacuum will do.

Cleaning supplies: Eco-friendly products are out there, but so are green knockoffs. It's called greenwashing, and it's not always easy to spot. "It's very difficult for a professional like myself, much less a consumer, to determine how green a product is," Denis says. Until an official entity emerges with an official green seal of approval, keep this in mind: Generations of mothers swear by baking soda and vinegar.

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