

# American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine

## TEN ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS YOU CAN LIVE WITHOUT

On Earth Day, we are reminded of our role in preserving the world's environment for future generations. Sometimes, the immensity of the global task feels overwhelming. Act locally! Here are 10 environmental hazards *you* can control in *your* own home to improve *your* environment.

### 1. TOBACCO SMOKE – NO SMOKING AT HOME

Long-term exposure to other people's tobacco smoke increases risks for lung cancer, respiratory infections, other lung problems, and perhaps heart disease.

- ✓ Do not allow tobacco smoke in your house.
- ✓ Call your local American Lung Association for more information.

### 2. RADON – TEST YOUR HOUSE

Radon, an odorless invisible gas, increases the risk of lung cancer, especially for smokers.

- ✓ Radon tests are inexpensive. For information about testing your house or apartment (if you live on the second floor or lower) call the National Radon Hotline at **800-SOS-RADON**.
- ✓ Call the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) Radon Fix-It Program at **800-644-6999** for advice about how you can cheaply reduce exposure to elevated radon levels.

### 3. ASBESTOS – LEAVE IT ALONE

Asbestos was commonly used as a building and insulation material in houses built from 1920 to 1978. Exposure to small amounts of asbestos is unlikely to cause problems, but breathing high levels increases risks of cancer and lung disease.

- ✓ Identify asbestos in your home and avoid disturbing it.
- ✓ Only specially trained and licensed contractors should remove asbestos. Improper removal techniques can greatly increase your exposure risk.
- ✓ For information on how to identify asbestos – and when to remove it – call the Consumer Product Safety Commission at **800-638-CPSC**, or consult EPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/opptintr/asbestos/ashome.htm#4](http://www.epa.gov/opptintr/asbestos/ashome.htm#4).

### 4. LEAD – IDENTIFY AND AVOID IT

Many U.S. houses built before 1978 contain lead paint, which contributes to the nearly 900,000 American children who suffer lead poisoning each year.

- ✓ Young children at risk for lead exposure should have their blood tested for lead levels. Talk to your physician about the appropriate testing schedule.
- ✓ If you own or live in an older home, especially if you have children, consider testing for lead paint. Testing is required in many states before homes can be sold or rented.
- ✓ "De-leading" a house should only be done by licensed trained professionals. If not properly performed, the process can result in much greater lead contamination.
- ✓ For further information about how to protect your family from lead poisoning, call the National Lead Information Center at **800-424-LEAD**, or consult EPA's web site at [www.epa.gov/lead/leadpbed.htm](http://www.epa.gov/lead/leadpbed.htm).

### 5. COMBUSTION GASES – EXHAUST THEM

Combustion gases include carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and sulfur dioxide. These gases can cause flu-like symptoms, respiratory illnesses, or death.

- ✓ Do not use unvented combustion appliances indoors. Portable kerosene heaters are especially risky.
- ✓ Use an exhaust hood over a gas stove and consider using only stoves that do not require always-on pilot lights.
- ✓ Clean and maintain your chimneys and furnace annually. Be certain that furnaces and water heaters are properly vented, and install a carbon monoxide monitor. Local fire departments and poison control centers can provide advice about such detectors.

### 6. WATER POLLUTION – KNOW WHAT YOU ARE DRINKING

Americans benefit from one of the safest water supplies in the world, but problems have occurred from time to time. Consumers can take a few extra measures to assure their tap water is clean.

- ✓ Public water systems provide annual water quality reports to their customers. For more information, call EPA's Drinking Water Hotline at **800-426-4791** or consult [www.epa.gov/safewater/dwhealth.html](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/dwhealth.html).
- ✓ People using private wells should test their water annually for nitrate and bacteria. Depending on location, testing may also be appropriate for pesticides, organic chemicals, or

radon. Check with your local public health officer to determine the need for specific tests in a given community.

- ✓ Older plumbing systems (pre-1988) may contain lead. Lead levels are highest in water that has been sitting for 6 hours or more. To decrease lead exposure, let the water run until it becomes as cold as it will before drawing it for cooking or drinking.
- ✓ Home water treatments and filters can improve the taste of water and, in some cases, its healthfulness, but the wrong or badly maintained filter can create a hazard. To learn more about water filters, consult EPA at [www.epa.gov/safewater/faq/faq.html#hwtu](http://www.epa.gov/safewater/faq/faq.html#hwtu).

## 7. HOUSEHOLD CHEMICALS – SELECT, USE, STORE, AND DISCARD WISELY

Some household products may be hazardous if used incorrectly. Choose the least dangerous chemical for the job. Consult your local library or bookstore for the many books on this topic.

- ✓ Keep household chemicals out of reach of children and pets. If possible, toxic chemicals should be stored outside of the house and away from living spaces.
- ✓ Follow label directions carefully. Never mix chemicals unless directed to do so by the manufacturers' instructions and never store them in unlabeled containers.
- ✓ Dispose of chemicals properly – on a household hazardous waste day. Contact your local fire department or health department to learn the time and place for hazardous waste disposal in your community.
- ✓ For poisoning emergencies, call the Poison Control Center at **800-222-1222** or 911 if a person has collapsed or is not breathing.

## 8. PESTICIDES – USE PROPERLY TO REDUCE THE RISKS

Maintain gardens, lawns, and trees in ways that naturally decrease susceptibility to pests, and minimize or eliminate the need for chemical pesticides. Consult EPA for advice at [www.epa.gov/oppfead1/Publications/lawncare.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/oppfead1/Publications/lawncare.pdf).

- ✓ Store firewood outside of and away from the house to avoid wood-destroying insects.
- ✓ Keep food in tight containers and clean up food residues to minimize household pests.

- ✓ Follow label instructions for personal protective equipment, mixing, application, and disposal. Always keep pesticides in locked cabinets out of the reach of children.
- ✓ Never transfer pesticides to unlabeled containers that may be mistaken for food or drink.
- ✓ Call the National Pesticide Information Center at **800-858-7378** or visit <http://ace.orst.edu/info/npic/gen.htm> for information about the safe use of pesticides.

## 9. ALLERGENS – AVOID AND CONTROL

Porous, water-damaged materials frequently grow molds and other organisms that can cause allergies and other illnesses. Consult EPA at [www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/moldresources.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/moldresources.html) for more information.

- ✓ Fix leaks and moisture problems.
- ✓ Do not humidify your home unless you clean the humidifier according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- ✓ Keep furry animals out of the house or at least out of the bedrooms. Brush them outside.
- ✓ Wrap your mattresses and pillows in allergy-proof covers.
- ✓ Consult the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology at <http://allergy.mcg.edu/patients/index.html> for more information.

## 10. FOOD POISONING – PREPARE AND STORE FOOD CORRECTLY

Proper preparation and storage of food are necessary to prevent food poisoning.

- ✓ Keep your refrigerator below 40 F.
- ✓ Promptly refrigerate cooked perishable food.
- ✓ Wash cutting boards with soap and hot water after each use.
- ✓ Do not allow raw meat, poultry, or fish to come into contact with food that will not be well cooked.
- ✓ Do not eat raw or undercooked eggs.
- ✓ For more information about food safety, consult [www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsafety/](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsafety/).

**For additional information about environmental hazards consult these other resources – [www.epa.gov/iaq/ia-intro.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/ia-intro.html) or [www.lungusa.org/air](http://www.lungusa.org/air).**

This check list was authored by Robert K. McLellan, MD, MPH, Chair of the ACOEM Environmental Medicine Committee.

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