

Make Your Home Healthier: 10 Ways to Make Your House Healthy and Safe

Adapted from Parents Magazine, Jeannette Moninger

Your home should be a haven: the one place where your children will be protected from harm. Still, more than 3 million kids get hurt at home each year, according to Safe Kids Worldwide, a nonprofit organization devoted to preventing unintentional injuries. Young children can spend up to 90 percent of their time indoors, so a healthy home environment is critical -- and yet many hazards aren't obvious. Experts say that these are the most important preventive steps to take.

Guard Against Scalding



A baby or toddler who is exposed to 140 degrees F water can be scalded in less than five seconds -- so make sure your hot-water heater is set to 120 degrees F, and always test the water temperature yourself before placing your child in the tub.

Watch Out for Windows



Every year, more than 4,000 kids end up in the emergency room after tumbling out of a window. It's crucial to install window guards (rows of bars no more than four inches apart that screw securely into the sides of window frames but can be released quickly by an adult in case of fire) or window stops (which prevent windows from opening more than four inches) on all upper-level windows. Babies and toddlers can be strangled by cords on blinds and shades, so place cribs and other furniture away from windows. It's best to use cordless window coverings in kids' bedrooms, but if you can't replace existing ones, visit windowcoverings.org to request free retrofit kits that make corded blinds and shades safer.

Foil Other Falls



They are the leading cause of unintentional injury for kids ages 14 and under, but your child's risk of being hurt in a fall -- down stairs or off furniture, for example -- multiplies once she's mobile. Toddlers are still mastering the whole walking thing, and they can lose their balance a lot. Install wall-mounted baby gates at both the top and bottom of stairs, and cushion corners and edges of tables and fireplace hearths with padding to protect your child from banging her head on them if she topples over.

Renovate Carefully



If your home was built before 1978, there's probably lead in the paint under the top coats on your walls and windows, as well as in old floor varnish. When lead dust gets stirred up during a renovation (or when paint starts to chip), the toxic particles put your child at risk of developmental and learning problems -- so it's important to hire a contractor who's certified in safely removing leaded materials. Call the National Lead Information Center at 800-424-LEAD to find a contractor or an inspector to measure the lead level in your home or water. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), home tests for lead paint aren't always accurate.

Test for Radon



Approximately one in 15 homes (including apartments) has a high level of radon, a radioactive gas released when uranium naturally breaks down in soil, rocks, and water. Radon is believed to be the leading cause of lung cancer in nonsmokers, but because you can't see or smell it, you won't know if you're being exposed without testing for it. Fortunately, an inexpensive test

kit that's available at home-improvement stores will be reliable in this case: Leave it out for as long as the directions recommend, then promptly return it for analysis. The EPA considers a reading of 4 picocuries per liter of air (pCi/L) or greater to be unsafe. If your levels are high, you'll need to have a certified radon-mitigation contractor install a piping system to vent the gas out from under your home. The EPA even recommends that you consider doing this if your level is higher than 2 pCi/L. Contact your state radon office for more information at epa.gov/iaq/whereyoulive.html. If you're building a new home, make sure your contractor uses radon-resistant construction techniques, and request a radon test as part of the inspection when purchasing a home. If yours tests negative, retest every two years or after renovations. Office of Children's Health Protection

Be Prepared for Fire



Kids ages 5 and younger are twice as likely to die in a residential fire than older children or adults because it's harder for them to escape on their own. It's critical to have a smoke alarm on every floor including the basement as well as outside and inside every bedroom. Remember to test them monthly. You should also have one multipurpose fire extinguisher for every 600 square feet of living space. When using an extinguisher, remember PASS: Pull the pin. Aim at the base of the fire. Squeeze or press the handle. Sweep from side to side at the base of the fire until it goes out.

Monitor Carbon Monoxide



Low to moderate levels of this colorless and odorless gas can cause symptoms similar to the flu (without fever). But as levels increase, the toxic effects of carbon monoxide (CO) can be deadly, especially for children, because the gas prevents oxygen from getting to the heart and brain. If you don't have carbon-monoxide alarms outside bedrooms and other sleeping areas, you may not know your family's being poisoned until it's too late. The most important way to prevent carbon-monoxide poisoning is to make sure that all your fuel-burning appliances are working properly. Have your heating system (and chimney and flues) inspected each year. However, CO can also be created by equipment like portable generators, cars, lawn mowers, and power washers that are powered by an internal combustion engine.

Ban Bugs Safely



Mice, cockroaches, ants, and other pests are annoying, but they're usually not nearly as big a health threat as the toxins that get rid of them. Pesticides contaminate the air your child breathes and the floor she plays on and increase her risk of developing neurological problems and health issues. Instead, seal off crevices in your floors and walls, weather-stripping doors and windows, and keeping your kitchen clean and free of food particles. If you must use pesticides, buy the smallest amount needed, and choose gels or baits instead of sprays.

Avoid Allergens and Irritants



Pound for pound, children breathe more air than adults do, so they're especially vulnerable to the effects of indoor environmental pollutants. Never let anyone smoke in your house; keep humidity levels at a minimum by using exhaust fans in the kitchen and bathrooms and a dehumidifier in your basement to prevent mold growth; remove any water-damaged carpet and furniture promptly; open doors and windows when cleaning, painting, or laying new carpet; and change furnace filters as recommended.

Lock Up Poisonous Products

That means not only cleaners, medications, and caustic cosmetic items like nail-polish remover but also perfume, bath oil, mouthwash, aftershave, and vitamins. More than 1 million kids are poisoned by ingesting common household items every year. Post the Poison Control Center's toll-free number (800-222-1222) near every phone in your house.