

Your Child and the Environment

Guidelines for Parents Part I Where Children Live



Children can be exposed to a number of environmental hazards where they live, in their food, and where they learn and play. Children are growing and, per pound of weight, drink more water, eat more food, and breathe more air than adults. Because of this, they are at higher risk for these hazards. In addition, children are more likely to put things into their mouths, and often spend more time close to the ground where many hazards are found. Environmental hazards cannot be avoided completely. However, there are many ways parents can reduce their children's exposure to them. This brochure has been developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents protect their children from environmental hazards.

Where children live

Children spend a good part of each day at home where they eat, sleep, and play. For most children, home is where they feel secure and comfortable. But there can also be things in the home that are harmful to children. Some of these things are in the air they breathe, or in the dust and dirt found in homes and yards.

Air pollution *inside* the home can be harmful to children. Indoor air pollution is caused by a buildup of gas or other chemicals inside a building. Some examples include:

- environmental tobacco smoke (ETS)
- carbon monoxide
- radon
- household products
- molds
- on-the-job hazards brought into the home
- asbestos

Environmental Tobacco Smoke (ETS)

ETS is the smoke that is breathed out by a smoker. ETS is also the smoke that comes from the tip of a lit cigarette. Exposure to ETS happens any time someone breathes in the smoke that comes from a lit cigarette, pipe or cigar. ETS contains many dangerous chemicals that have been proven to cause cancer. ETS exposure has been linked to 3,000 lung cancer deaths each year in people who don't even smoke!

What You Can Do

- If you are a smoker—quit!
- Don't let people smoke in your house or car.
- Choose a babysitter who doesn't allow smoking in the house.
- Talk to your pediatrician about ETS and ask to see the AAP brochure, *Environmental Tobacco Smoke: A Danger to Children*.

Carbon monoxide

Carbon monoxide is a toxic gas that has no taste, no color, and no odor. It is produced by appliances or heaters that burn gas, oil, wood, propane, or kerosene. Carbon monoxide can get trapped inside the home when:

- appliances do not work properly
- a stove or furnace is not working properly due to a clogged chimney or vent
- a car is left running in an attached garage
- a charcoal grill is used in a closed area

Carbon monoxide poisoning is very dangerous. This is especially true for children because they are smaller and they need more oxygen than adults. Be aware of flu-like symptoms (headache, fatigue, nausea), especially if they affect everyone in your house at the same time or go away when you leave the house. If left unchecked, exposure to carbon monoxide can lead to memory loss, personality changes, brain damage, and death.

What You Can Do

- Install carbon monoxide detectors in your home, especially near bedrooms.
- Never leave a car running in an attached garage, even if the garage door is open.
- Never use a charcoal grill inside the home or in a closed space.
- Have furnaces, wood stoves, fireplaces, hot water heaters, ovens, ranges, and clothes dryers serviced and inspected at least every year.
- Never use the oven to heat your home.

Radon

Radon is a gas that comes from the breakdown of uranium in rock and soil. Radon can also be found in water, building materials, and natural gas. Radon can seep into a home through cracks in the foundation, floors, and walls. High levels of radon have been found in homes in many parts of the United States.

Breathing in radon does not cause health problems right away. However, over long periods of time, it can increase the risk of lung cancer. Radon is believed to be the second most common cause of lung cancer (after smoking) in the United States.

What You Can Do

- Check with your health department to see if radon levels are high in your area.
- Test your home for radon. This is easy and inexpensive using radon detectors. The results of these tests can be analyzed by a certified laboratory. You cannot test yourself or your child for radon exposure.
- If radon levels in your home are too high, contact the Environmental Protection Agency and ask about their booklets on reducing radon risk or call the Radon Hotline at 800/767-7236.

Household products

Many homes contain products that can be environmental hazards like cleaning products, drain cleaner, antifreeze. These common household products give off dangerous fumes or leave residues. Many can be harmful if they are not thrown away properly (for example, if they are left in the garage).

What You Can Do

- Only use these products when necessary.
- Always use adequate ventilation.
- Store them in a safe place.
- Dispose of empty containers through your local hazardous waste disposal center.

Molds

Molds grow almost anywhere and can be found in any part of a home.

Common places where molds grow include:

- damp basements
- closets
- shower stalls and bathtubs
- refrigerators
- air conditioners and humidifiers
- garbage pails
- mattresses
- carpeting (especially if it got wet)

Molds can cause health problems in children. Children who live in moldy places are more likely to develop allergies, asthma, and other health problems.

What You Can Do

- Keep the surfaces in your home dry.
- Wet items (such as carpeting that cannot be dried) should be thrown away.
- Keep air conditioners and humidifiers clean and in good working order.
- Use exhaust fans in the kitchen and the bathroom to help keep the air dry.
- Avoid using items that are likely to get moldy like foam rubber pillows and mattresses.

On the job hazards brought into the home

Sometimes a parent's job can create environmental hazards to children. This can happen when lead, chemicals, and fumes from the workplace are brought into the home on skin, hair, clothes, or shoes. People who work in the following areas are most at risk for bringing chemicals into the home:

- painting and construction sites
- auto body or repair shops
- auto battery and radiator factories
- shipyards
- area in which the person comes into contact with harmful metals or chemicals

What You Can Do

- Find out if you are exposed to lead, asbestos, mercury, or chemicals on your job.
- If so, shower and change out of work clothes and shoes before coming home.
- Wash the work clothes separately from other laundry.

Asbestos

Asbestos is a natural fiber that was commonly used in schools and homes for fireproofing, insulation, and soundproofing between the 1940s and 1970s. Asbestos is not dangerous unless it becomes crumbly. If that happens, asbestos fibers can be released into the air and breathed into the lungs. Breathing in asbestos fibers can cause chronic health problems, including a rare form of lung cancer. Schools are required by law to either remove asbestos or make sure that children are not exposed. Asbestos can still be found in certain older homes, particularly as insulation around pipes.

What You Can Do

- Do not allow children to play around exposed or deteriorating materials that may contain asbestos.
- If you think there is asbestos in your home, have a professional inspect it.
- If your home has asbestos in poor condition, use a **certified contractor** to help solve the problem. You could have more problems if the asbestos is not removed safely.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 57,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety, and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults.

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