

Hazards at Home

By [Reed Karaim](#) May 2008 - AARP Bulletin Today

Is the environment—your home environment—hazardous to your health? With new research continuing to show that unhealthy substances found in everyday products often pose higher risks for certain segments of the population, it's a question becoming more important for older Americans.

With good reason. Longer life spans may increase the chances that cumulative exposure will cause illnesses with long latency periods, such as cancer or Parkinson's disease, to develop. And older people are more likely to have conditions—such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, respiratory disease and diabetes—that can dramatically reduce their ability to withstand exposure to environmental hazards.

But a recent study suggests that one characteristic of older Americans—a high degree of environmental awareness—may help reduce their exposure to toxic hazards and therefore decrease the risks they face. According to an AARP Services survey released in December, almost 70 percent of Americans who are boomers or older say they feel a sense of responsibility to make the world a better place. And respondents who said they were likely to buy brands that are environmentally safe rose from 50 percent of the youngest boomers to 65 percent of those age 72-plus.

The stakes are high. Older people tend to process and eliminate toxicants from their bodies more slowly than younger people. And “as we age, we become less efficient at detoxification—the slowing down of kidney, liver and immune system functioning all play a role. In this, older people are more like infants and children in their ability to fend off toxic assaults,” says Sandra Steingraber, the author of *Living Downstream: An Ecologist Looks at Cancer and the Environment*.

Still, ferreting out potentially hazardous substances can be a challenge. “We're not suggesting that you do away with all these things immediately,” says Paul McRandle, deputy editor at the National Geographic Green Guide. Here are products to watch out for and ways you can reduce risk.

Paint and solvents: If paint and paint solvents, such as mineral spirits, turpentine, methanol or xylene, are used improperly, their fumes can stress your lungs and heart, contributing to irregular heartbeat, according to the Environmental Protection Agency's Aging Initiative. That's because many of these products contain volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Check the label: Alkyd- and oil-based paints generally have higher levels than latex and water-based paints; many stores now carry VOC-

free paints. Old containers of hazardous products can leak chemicals into the air over time, which can build up in enclosed areas. Use and store products in well-ventilated areas.

Cleaners: Chemicals to avoid in cleaners, says McRandle, “run from ammonia, which is known to trigger asthma, elements in chlorine bleach, which is a lung irritant and will kill you if you swallow it, to things like glycol ethers, which are used to dissolve grime and dirt, and are easily absorbed by the skin and can cause nerve damage.” Protect your skin by wearing rubber gloves and your lungs by ventilating your work area or wearing a mask. For a less toxic cleaner, try hydrogen peroxide, baking soda or white vinegar.

Pesticides: Studies have suggested there may be a connection between pesticide exposure and Parkinson’s disease. Some people may have a genetic susceptibility to the substance that later triggers the disease. In addition, pesticides can be dangerous for those with weakened hearts or lungs, the EPA warns, leading to arrhythmia or even heart attack.

Clothing: Although clothing labels aren’t required to list chemicals used in finishes, many permanent press fabrics and some older water-repellent and flame-retardant fabrics contain formaldehyde, an upper-respiratory irritant. “In general you are better off looking for untreated clothing made of more natural fibers like cotton,” McRandle says.

Furniture/draperies/carpet pads/stuffing: Before 2000 the Scotchgard anti-stain treatments on some furniture and draperies used to include chemical compounds that were potential carcinogens. In 2000, Scotchgard revised its formula to use compounds considered safer.

Another potentially hazardous treatment can be found in some carpet pads and older stuffing in furniture and mattresses. There is evidence suggesting polybrominated diphenyl ethers, used as flame retardants in these products, can affect the thyroid gland and the nervous and reproductive systems. “We don’t advise that people throw out all their old furniture,” McRandle says. “But we do recommend that you seal up that rip in an old couch.”

Nonstick cooking pans: Nonstick surfaces aren’t generally considered a risk at normal cooking temperatures, but some can release 15 different toxic chemicals, including two carcinogens, if left unattended on a burner, according to a study by the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit research group in Washington.

Resources

The Environmental Protection Agency's Aging Initiative (www.epa.gov/aging/) offers information on a variety of household and environmental hazards for older Americans.

The Green Guide (www.thegreenguide.com) includes articles reviewing potentially dangerous chemicals found in household items and the steps consumers can take to deal with them.

The Green Seal program (www.greenseal.org/) provides certification standards for environmentally safe products.

To find a collection site for disposing of hazardous household products, visit earth911.org.



5 Natural Pest Repellents

Here are safer alternatives to commercial pesticides:

Ants: Sprinkle cinnamon, bay leaves, cayenne pepper or baby powder in problem areas and along baseboards and windowsills.

Cockroaches: Sprinkle equal parts of baking soda and confectioners' sugar in problem areas.

Mice: Place cotton dipped in peppermint oil near problem areas. Used kitty litter is another repellent.

Mosquitoes: Mix 2 teaspoons of apple cider vinegar in a glass of water placed on your deck or balcony or dab lavender oil on your wrists and elbows.

Flies: Small sachets of crushed mint placed around the home will discourage flies. So will a potted sweet basil plant. —*Sid Kirchheimer*
