



Health  
Canada

Santé  
Canada

*Your health and  
safety... our priority.*

*Votre santé et votre  
sécurité... notre priorité.*

# IS YOUR HOME HEALTHY?

## Easy Steps to Maintaining a Healthy Home

Environmental Health Guide for Seniors at Home



Health Canada is the federal department responsible for helping the people of Canada maintain and improve their health. We assess the safety of drugs and many consumer products, help improve the safety of food, and provide information to Canadians to help them make healthy decisions. We provide health services to First Nations people and to Inuit communities. We work with the provinces to ensure our health care system serves the needs of Canadians.

Également disponible en français sous le titre :

*Votre maison est-elle en santé? Trucs faciles pour avoir une maison en santé*

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## THE BASICS

It's important that the places we call home are healthy environments, for ourselves and our visitors.

Risks to health can occur in any home through **environmental factors** from nature itself, **products** we use, the **air** we breathe, or sometimes from the **food** we eat, or the **water** we drink.

This guide talks about common health risks and tips you can use to help ensure a healthy home environment.

Some general advice to reduce exposure to a variety of harmful substances includes:

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least **20 seconds**.
- Remove outdoor shoes when entering your home, and ask visitors to do the same.
- Reduce dust and dirt by vacuuming, dusting and wet-mopping regularly.



## Protect Visiting Children

Children come into close contact with their physical environment – crawling on floors, touching and tasting things. Dust and dirt are key sources of contact with substances such as lead, which can affect children’s development even at low levels of exposure.



- Make a special effort to have a **clean play area** for visiting children.
- **Supervise at all times.** It can be surprising what children can be hurt by.

## Safe handling of medications is an important factor:

- Keep medications in original containers in secure, cool, dry areas, **out of reach** of children.
- Always use medication **as directed** by your doctor or pharmacist.
- Return leftover or expired medications to your pharmacy – don't dispose of them in the sink or toilet.

For health-related information beyond the scope of this guide, please contact your health care professional.



# HOUSEHOLD CHEMICALS

You probably use many chemical products in and around your home, such as cleaning products, paints and stain, or windshield washer fluid. Moth balls and moth flakes are still being used. All of these products can be harmful.

## Managing Chemicals at Home

What you can do:

- Read the labels. Look for these **warning symbols** – they indicate that the product could be “hazardous”.



Explosive



Corrosive



Flammable



Poison







- Carefully follow all safety information and directions.
- Open a nearby window to ensure **adequate ventilation** when using products like paints, varnishes, paint strippers, or cleaning products.
- **Take fresh air breaks** during painting or household renovations.
- Moth balls and moth flakes can be harmful if label directions aren't followed. Be sure to read and follow the package directions carefully.
- Consider choosing **low-emission** paints, varnishes and glues. Check with manufacturers for details on specific products.



- Wear protective gloves to avoid contact with skin.
- Buy only what you need for the job to minimize waste.
- Store chemical products in their **original containers** and in safe, secure locations – locked up and out of the reach of children.
- **Dispose of household hazardous waste products safely.** Check with your municipality about how and where.



## INDOOR AIR QUALITY

Poor indoor air quality can affect your health.

What you can do:

- **Open windows and doors** when weather and outdoor air quality permits in order to air out your home.
- **Maintain** your furnace and ventilation system by having them inspected regularly by a qualified technician.
- Change or clean filters as recommended.

### **Reduce the Risk of Mould**

Mould and damp conditions may irritate your eyes, nose and throat, and cause coughing, wheezing, and shortness of breath.



## What you can do:

- Look for damp spots in your home
  - Remove **small amounts of mould** with hot water and dish detergent.
  - Hire a professional for **larger areas** – the size of half a door, or bigger.
- Prevent mould from growing or returning.
  - Repair water leaks and clean up quickly after any flood. Make sure everything is dry again within **48 hours**.
  - Use exhaust fans when cooking and showering.
  - Make sure your clothes dryer, stove, kitchen and bathroom fans all **vent to the outdoors**.
  - Remove basement clutter.
  - Avoid storing fabric, food, paper or wood in damp areas like a basement. Use plastic storage bins if required.



- Keep humidity low – about 50% in summer and 30% in colder weather. Use a dehumidifier if needed.
- **Do you rent?** Speak to your landlord about any mould problems. Find out about landlord/tenant issues from your provincial/territorial government.

## **Avoid Smoke**

Smoke hurts everyone. The chemicals it contains contribute directly to illnesses such as asthma, cancer and heart disease.

There is no level of ventilation that will eliminate the harmful effects of smoke.

What you can do:

- Avoid exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke – make your home and car 100% smoke-free.
- Avoid exposure to wood smoke. Wood smoke may smell nice, but it's not good for you.

## Keep Carbon Monoxide Out

Carbon monoxide is a **poisonous gas** that has no colour, smell or taste. Health risks are greater for people with cardiovascular (or heart) disease. Extremely high levels of carbon monoxide could lead to death.

What you can do:

- Install a carbon monoxide detector certified by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA).
  - Install the detector **outside bedrooms**. Follow the manufacturer's suggestions on how to install, test, use and replace the detector.
- Maintain and inspect
  - Have furnaces, fireplaces, gas stoves, chimneys and water heaters maintained and inspected regularly by a trained professional.





- Leave it outside
  - Never use a barbecue indoors.
  - Don't use kerosene or oil space heaters or lamps in enclosed areas unless they're designed for indoor use.
- No idling indoors
  - Don't idle vehicles or other gas-powered machines (e.g., lawnmowers, snowblowers) in the garage, **even if the garage door is open.**

## Learn About Radon

Radon is a gas that can be found in almost all homes. If a person is exposed to high levels over many years, it can cause lung cancer.



What you can do:

- **Test for it** – it's the only way to know the level of radon gas in your home. You can either:
  - Purchase a long-term, easy-to-use radon test kit from a home improvement store, by phone or over the Internet, or
  - hire a certified measurement professional.
- **Fix it** if the levels are high according to Canadian guidelines (over 200 becquerels per cubic metre).
  - Hire a certified radon professional to determine the best and most cost effective way to reduce the radon level in your home.





## SAFE FOOD HANDLING

As we age, our immune system often becomes less effective and our risk of severe health complications from foodborne and waterborne illnesses can increase.

What you can do:

- Keep it clean
  - Wash your hands before preparing food.
  - If plates or utensils have come into contact with **raw food**, wash them thoroughly before re-using or use a clean plate.
  - Wash fresh fruits and vegetables with clean drinking water.



- Wash re-usable grocery bags frequently with hot soapy water, especially if they've been used for raw meat, poultry, fish or seafood. Dedicate re-usable bags for different uses – one for meat, poultry, fish and seafood, one for produce and one for ready-to eat foods. Label the bags accordingly.
- Clean your fridge often.
- Keep it chilled
  - As soon as you get home from shopping, refrigerate or freeze raw meat, poultry, fish and seafood.
  - Refrigerate leftovers as soon as possible or **within 2 hours** after putting them on the table or counter.
  - Keep deli meats refrigerated at all times and **use within 4 days** after opening the package, even if this is sooner than the best-before date.
  - Store fruits and vegetables in the fridge.

**Rule of Thumb:**

When in doubt,  
throw it out!



- Defrost your raw meat, poultry, fish or seafood in the fridge, in the microwave or in cold water.
  - If you've defrosted in the microwave, food should be cooked as soon as possible after thawing.
  - When defrosting a large piece of meat that doesn't fit in the fridge, immerse it in cold water in its original unopened wrapping. Refresh the water often (for example, every 30 minutes) so that it *stays cold*.
  - Don't refreeze thawed food.
  - Immediately wash hands, sinks, kitchen surfaces or containers that come in contact with raw meat, poultry, fish or seafood.
- Cook it thoroughly
  - Use a digital food thermometer to ensure you cook meat, poultry, fish and seafood to the *safe internal temperature*.
  - Make sure the thermometer goes through the *thickest part of the meat*, all the way to the middle, without touching any bones.

## DRINKING WATER

In Canada, our drinking water is generally of very high quality. Many Canadians receive treated drinking water from their municipality.

If you get your drinking water from a well or other sources on your own property, make sure it's safe to drink. [Water in its natural state usually requires treatment](#). Drinking bottled water is generally a safe choice, when handled and stored properly.

What you can do:

- Municipal water
  - Your municipality may issue advisories (such as boil water advisories) when there is a drinking water quality concern. It's important to follow instructions carefully.
  - Contact your municipality with questions regarding the treatment or quality of your drinking water.



- If you use a pitcher-type water filter, store it in the fridge and **replace the filter regularly**, as indicated in the manufacturer’s instructions.
- Well water
  - Have well water tested by your local public health department to confirm that it’s safe, or what kind of treatment it may need.
  - Purchase only treatment devices that will address your specific water quality issue; devices should be certified to remove specific contaminants.

Important: If you use a **water softener**, the softened water should not be used for drinking or food preparation. It can contain high levels of sodium or potassium – a concern for certain medical conditions or with some medications.

- Bottled water
  - Store bottled water in a cool, clean, dark place, such as a basement.
  - Refrigerate the bottle after opening to reduce the growth of bacteria.
  - Store bottled water away from household solvents like paint-thinners or cleaners. Over time, solvents can get into the air and pass through the plastic bottle into the water.
  - Avoid refilling water bottles – many were designed for one-time use. Save on recycling by using a reuseable water container.



## EXTREME HEAT

If it gets too hot inside your home, it can be dangerous for your health, especially if you have existing medical conditions such as breathing difficulties, heart or kidney problems, hypertension, or suffer from a mental illness like depression.

**Heat stroke is a medical emergency.**

But there's good news – heat illnesses are preventable.



What you can do:

- **Know your risks** – speak to a doctor or pharmacist to find out your personal risk factors and follow their recommendations. Learn about the symptoms of heat illness.
- Prepare for the heat
  - Check local weather forecasts for **heat alerts**.
  - If you have an air conditioner, make sure it works before the hot weather starts.
  - Arrange visits by family members or friends during very hot days, in case you need assistance.





- Stay hydrated
  - Drink plenty of cool liquids **before you feel thirsty** – water is best.
  - Eat more fruits and vegetables – they have high water content.
- Keep your home cool
  - If you have an air conditioner with a thermostat, set it between **22°C and 26°C (72°F and 79°F)**.
  - If you use a window air conditioner, cool only one room where you can go for relief.
  - Prepare meals that don't need cooking in the oven.
  - Block the sun with awnings, curtains or blinds.
  - If safe, open your windows at night to let in cooler air.
- Stay cool
  - Wear loose-fitting, light-coloured clothing made from breathable fabric.

## CONSUMER PRODUCTS

Every day, you use consumer products like personal care products, electronics, clothing, equipment and cleaning products.

Some products can pose health risks, so it's important to pay attention to advisories, warnings and recall notices.

What you can do:

- **Be aware of product recalls** – check with the manufacturer, or call Health Canada at 1 800 O-Canada.





- **Supervise visiting children** – make sure you have a safe, clean area where kids can play; children are often unaware of things that can hurt them.
- Think safety – read labels and follow all instructions.
- **Do not use** damaged, recalled or banned items.
- Be careful when buying or borrowing second-hand products, including children's toys. Make sure you get instructions for use and watch for broken or missing parts.
- **Report** health or safety-related problems with consumer products to the manufacturer. As well, report it to Health Canada by calling 1 800 O-Canada.

## TAKE ACTION – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Find out more:

Call **1 800 O-Canada** (1-800-622-6232)

TTY 1-800-926-9105

For more information online visit:

*Hazards in your home* at [Canada.ca/health](https://Canada.ca/health)





