



National Center for Healthy Housing

Primary Prevention

The adage “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” directly applies to health hazards in housing. Protecting children and other residents from health hazards in their homes requires preventing hazards from developing, or identifying and controlling hazards before anyone’s health is harmed.

Unfortunately, in most cases, housing-related health hazards are overlooked until after illness develops. For example, the standard approach to childhood lead poisoning relies on using children as “lead detectors,” postponing action to identify and control lead-based paint hazards until after a child has been identified as poisoned. Similarly, asthma triggers in the home environment usually are ignored until after a child has developed asthma or until after an attack requires a visit to the emergency room.

In the case of housing-related health hazards, the goal must be prevention rather than waiting to treat disease after it develops. Prevention requires viewing the home as the vector of disease and taking safeguards to prevent and control hazards in the first place.

While some homes present severe problems that require highly trained experts and complex diagnostic equipment, in most homes, much simpler strategies exist to avoid and control health hazards. Most hazards can be avoided altogether through good maintenance based on common sense principles, such as ensuring good ventilation, controlling moisture and water damage, properly venting combustion appliances, and following basic safeguards to avoid exposure to toxics. In most cases, only modest changes in maintenance practices are needed to keep homes safe or to avoid inadvertently creating a hazard during renovation or remodeling. In some cases, low-cost improvements can be made that will significantly contribute to a healthy home. For example, every bathroom and kitchen should have an exhaust fan that is vented to the outside to remove moisture and reduce humidity.

In addition, it makes sense to periodically check homes for clues to health hazards. One of the most revealing tools is easy and economical: a visual inspection. It makes good sense to take a few minutes at least once a year to do a visual check of every home for signs of problems, such as leaky roofs and gutters, plumbing leaks, standing water around the foundation, other moisture problems, peeling paint, and vent connections on combustion appliances. Serious and complex housing-related health hazards may require the assistance of experts to diagnose and remediate the problem.

Building a healthy home environment for All Children