Tips for Healthy Remodeling

Remodeling makes our homes fit better, but may not make us feel better. Even under normal conditions, air inside our homes can be 2 to 5 times more polluted than air outside. When you add fumes from painting and gluing, dust from demolition and scraping, and the offgassing of synthetic building products, you can have a house with very unhealthy air.

Sources of Indoor Air Pollution

Paints, paint strippers, and other solvents release chemicals into the air called “volatile organic compounds,” or VOCs. VOCs can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation; headaches; loss of coordination; nausea; and damage to liver, kidneys, and central nervous system. Some compounds are suspected or known to cause cancer. **What to do:** Look for paints and finishes that emit low or no VOCs. Avoid aerosol products.

**Pressed wood products** such as particleboard and fiberboard, used in furniture, subflooring, and paneling, release formaldehyde for many years. Formaldehyde exposure has symptoms similar to those of VOCs; some people also experience severe allergic reactions, rashes, and nose bleeds. **What to do:** Look for solid wood products instead. Seal exposed boards with water-based polyurethane.

**Carpet pads and glues.** Carpet padding can contain formaldehyde (see above). **What to do:** Ask for carpet padding made without formaldehyde and for carpet that does not need to be glued down. Ask if new carpet can be unrolled and aired out in the warehouse prior to being installed in your home.

**Dust and particles.** Dust from demolition and remodeling can trigger asthma attacks. Particles from sawing, scraping, and sanding may contain asbestos, lead, and arsenic. **What to do:** See other side.

While You’re Remodeling

During the project, isolate work areas from living spaces with plastic sheeting or zipper doors. If you have pets, keep them out of the work area so they don’t track contaminants throughout the home. Shut off the air ducts in the work area and keep the rest of the home well-ventilated.
If you have sensitive individuals in the home, consider having them move out during a major remodel. This could include anyone with asthma or allergies, especially children; people who are chemically sensitive; and pregnant women.

Place heavy-duty floor mats at each entrance door. Sweep work areas daily, and vacuum frequently several times a week, using a high-efficiency filter (“HEPA filter”). Wear a dust mask when cleaning up as well as when working. In addition, you can set up an air filter (but not an ozone-generator – those irritate the lungs) and box fans to pull air outdoors.

After remodeling, change your furnace filters. Use the pleated paper high-efficiency furnace filters. They capture many more particles than the typical fiberglass filter. Ideally, you should change these filters every two or three months, especially after remodeling. If you have mold or dust accumulated in your furnace ducts you could also have them cleaned, but this is not always a necessary step.

Safely dispose of leftover hazardous materials from remodeling, including mercury-containing thermostats, fluorescent tubes, and paints and solvents, at an appropriate hazardous waste facility. In Thurston County, homeowners can use HazoHouse at the Thurston County Waste and Recovery Center at 2418 Hogum Bay Road in Lacey, for free. Latex paint can be dried out and disposed of in the garbage. Contractors can also use HazoHouse but need to pay. For information call 360-867-2491 or see www.co.thurston.wa.us/wwm

For More Information
For more information, call Thurston County Public Health and Social Services, Environmental Health Division at 360-867-2674 (TDD line 360-867-2603) or visit our website at http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/ehkids/index.html

Another resource is “Preferable Building Materials for the Nursery and Child’s Room” by the Washington Toxic Coalition see http://www.watoxics.org/ under Toxics in the Home or call 800-844-SAFE ext. 7.

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