

What you can't see

... can hurt you when the substance is radon, off-gased chemicals or carbon monoxide

By Kenya McCullum

As a homeowner, you prepare for worst-case scenarios all the time. You lock your doors and might install an alarm system to keep out burglars, buy insurance to protect the house and its contents from fires and floods, and keep up with maintenance to ensure the place stays in good condition.

However, there are threats that most of us don't often think about — threats that can't be seen with the naked eye. The most common of these invisible threats in homes include:

Radon. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, radon is the second most common

cause of lung cancer in the United States, with more than 20,000 people dying from radon-related illnesses every year. Radon is a radioactive gas that is released into the air of a home through soil, pipes, basement floors and drains.

Off-gassing. Off-gassing occurs when dangerous chemicals evaporate into the air from certain household items. Some of the most common sources of off-gassing are carpet and other flooring materials, paint, insulation, plywood, countertops, mattresses and wallpaper. When chemicals from these products are released in the home, they can cause an allergic reaction, with symptoms such as watery eyes, nasal congestion, skin irritation and coughing.

Carbon monoxide. Carbon monoxide is a toxic gas that is odorless, colorless and deadly. This

poison can be spread through a home by leaky chimneys, gas space heaters, gas stoves, furnaces and generators. Low levels of the toxin can produce health problems such as dizziness, nausea, fatigue, headaches and disorientation. When there are higher levels of carbon monoxide in the home, a person's brain function and vision can become impaired. In extreme cases, carbon monoxide exposure can cause death.

Quick tip

Radon testing

There are several devices on the market that allow homeowners to test for radon. These tests can be conducted on a short-term (under 90 days) or long-term (over 90 days) basis. For more accurate results, experts suggest long-term testing because it will give you a better idea of the level of radon indoors throughout the year.



Combatting hidden threats

Reduce the amount of **radon gas** that enters a structure by sealing cracks and openings in the foundation. In addition, ventilating a home by opening windows, doors and vents can go a long

way toward reducing the concentration of radon gas trapped inside.

Airing out products that produce **off-gassing** can help keep potentially irritating chemicals out of your home. When you buy products like mattresses and carpets, park them in a ventilated garage, so that chemicals are released before you bring the items inside. For people with particular sensitivity, low-VOC "green" products can provide good options.

Most paint manufacturers, for instance, now offer formulations with a low amount of volatile organic compounds. Some even offer paints with no VOCs.

In order to keep **carbon monoxide** from building up to dangerous levels inside a home, use an exhaust fan over gas stoves, keep a watchful eye on gas appliances, have furnaces and chimneys regularly maintained and *never* leave a car running in the garage.



Extra, extra

Critter alert

Bugs and rodents are among the indoor hazards that you *can* see. More than a mere nuisance, these critters also can cause a myriad of health issues.

For example, rodents can carry diseases such as rabies, trichinosis and Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome, or HPS. Since these conditions are caused by exposure to rodent urine, saliva and feces, it's best to handle the problem immediately when you notice the tell-tale signs that mice and rats are in your home — droppings, urine stains, marks from gnawing and burrows.

The most effective way to rid a home of these pests is to use traps and poisons. Once the critters are gone, rodent-proof the house. Keeping a home clean at all times, especially in areas where food is served, as well as sealing up cracks that give mice and rats easy access can help prevent further infestations.

Insects that are common in the home — especially ants, mosquitos, cockroaches, and flies — can also spread germs that cause illness. When these critters are found, baits or bug sprays can be an effective way to control them. However, these harsh poisons can come with their own brand of risks to human health, so you may want to explore natural forms of pest control, such as using boric acid, baking soda or vinegar to kill or drive away bugs.

As with rodents, the best way to control insects is through exclusion. You can keep bugs out by sealing cracks and repairing damaged screening. The Mississippi State University Extension Service points out that insects also often hitch a ride into homes via second-hand possessions. That hand-me-down DVR or box of books might harbor a little colony of cockroaches. Don't be afraid of used items, just be aware, the Extension suggests.

Should you be faced with home-invading pests that you would prefer not to deal with on your own, the time to call a pest-control company is sooner rather than later — before an infestation spins out of control.

