Minimize indoor air pollution

Every fall the federal government recommends that Canadians weatherize their homes in order to reduce the amount of energy needed for heating and cooling. What we often neglect during this process, however, are the steps we should also take to minimize the dangers from pollution sources inside our homes.

In the last several years, a growing body of scientific evidence has indicated that the air within homes can be more seriously polluted than the outdoor air in even the largest and most industrialized cities. Other research indicates that people spend approximately 90 percent of their time indoors, especially during the cold winter months. Thus, for many people, the risks to health may be greater due to exposure to air pollution indoors than outdoors.

Measures such as installing storm windows, weather stripping, caulking and blown-in wall insulation can reduce the amount of outdoor air infiltrating into a home. Consequently, after winterizing, concentrations of indoor air pollutants from sources inside the home can increase.

According to Jean Deslandes, Marketing Manager for Venmar Ventilation, first clues of poor indoor air in your home are the signs of inadequate ventilation, such as stuffy air, moisture condensation on cold surfaces, or mold and mildew growth. "It's crucial that additional weatherization measures should not be undertaken until these problems have been corrected."

Most homes have more than one source that contributes to indoor air pollution. Some of these sources can include smoke, dust, pet dander, radon, mold and other pollutants which can pose serious health risks and contribute to respiratory disease, asthma and even lung cancer.

Fortunately, there are steps that most people can take both to reduce the risk from these existing sources and to prevent new problems from occurring. Here are some tips to consider:

- Operate bathroom fans, if present, to remove moisture from showers (these fans should be ducted to the outside of the home), or simply crack the window to prevent moisture buildup.
- When a wood fire is present, a window should always be kept open — especially in a tightly sealed, energy efficient house.
- Make sure gas cooking appliances are vented to the outdoors and the kitchen fan is turned on when such appliances are in use.
- Install a carbon monoxide detector on every floor of the house.
- Make sure a home's roof and windows are in good shape. Water leaks, condensation and elevated levels of humidity may not be visible, but moisture in interior wall spaces can encourage mold growth and structural degradation.
- For optimal air quality, Deslandes recommends you invest in an air purification system that will both filter out harmful pollutants and distribute fresh air throughout the home, such as, the new Pure Air Machine from Venmar. It combines heat recovery ventilation and HEPA filtration. The HEPA filter works to trap airborne allergens and assists in distributing fresh air throughout the home.

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