

## A healthy home checkup Not sure if you're up to snuff? Nonprofit's new checklist can help

By Kate Ramsayer / *The Bulletin*

Published: July 19, 2010 4:00AM PST

Bend mom Sue Monaco keeps a close eye on the products and chemicals that come into her house.

She doesn't buy harsh chemical or toxic cleaning materials, shops for organic foods, doesn't use Roundup on weeds and gets wood toys for her two young children. And she spends a lot of time figuring out which products are safe, and effective, to use.

"My husband and I say it's a journey," Monaco said. "We've spent a lot of time doing our research and finding this information out."

More and more, parents are realizing the impacts of potentially harmful chemicals in the home, said Jen Coleman, outreach director with the Portland-based Oregon Environmental Council.

But the sheer quantity of information out there can be overwhelming, she said. So to help parents create a healthy home, the environmental nonprofit has developed an extensive checklist for homeowners and renters to use to identify potential problem areas. It also gives them hints for how to clean things up.

The list contains roughly 90 questions about different aspects of a home, followed by recommendations — many low-cost or free — for what to do to improve its environmental health.

"I find that parents have a hard time keeping track of this stuff," she said. "We're giving parents a way to start at the front door and go all the way through the back door, and do sort of a health checkup of the home."

The checkup, released today, is designed not only for parents, but for people over 65 and those with asthma, allergies, heart or respiratory issues, Coleman said — people who can be the most vulnerable to pollutants.



It covers everything from removing shoes before entering the house to paying attention to smells in the house, to checking for any exposed foam in furniture, to checking for water damage, mold and mildew.

"If you've never thought of it before, if you've never sat down and tried to improve your home environment, it can be kind of daunting. It's a five-page checklist," she said. "You start by taking control of the things you can."

Most people can do at least one of three major things to freshen up their living environments, Coleman said. "One of them is to improve air quality to make sure you have air flow," she said.

People can simply open windows for five minutes a day to move fresh air through the house, she said. And by holding a tissue in front of exhaust fans, home-owners can check whether the devices are taking in air — and the associated pollutants.

Fresh air flowing through rooms also can help control the humidity, which helps prevent mold and mildew and the potential for associated environmental health problems, she said.

Another big area where people can make easy changes, she said, is by controlling dust. "Making sure you have a regular routine of dusting is going to go a long way," Coleman said.

One study tested an average sample of dust and found remnants of 60 different substances, she said. But getting rid of those 60 different pollutants can be as simple as taking a wet rag or microfiber cloth to the dusty surfaces.

Coleman also recommends that people examine what their family is eating.

"If you're getting a good diet, good nutrition, your body is going to be more resilient and stronger, and able to deal with the things you can't control," she said.

The group's checkup includes advice on how to prepare fish to reduce exposure to toxins that can build up in the skin and fat, and what foods to avoid because of chemicals in the packaging in some cans, plastics or the grease-proof coatings of microwave popcorn bags.



The list also draws people's attention to what products — like paints, solvents, pesticides and cleaners — are in a house, even if they're rarely used.

“That exercise of getting down on your hands and knees in front of your cabinet and reading the labels is a real eye-opener,” she said, noting that people often can get rid of their chemicals through the county hazardous waste programs.

And it's not only the products that people think of as harsh that can be potential environmental problems. Personal care products — like soaps, lotions and shampoos — also can contain chemicals that have not been tested for health impacts, she said, but are used daily in many cases.

The publication recommends avoiding products with fragrance added, avoiding ingredients that have “fluoro” or “perfluoro” in the name, which is the same class of chemicals as in nonstick pans, and avoiding antibacterial products that contain triclosan, which can lead to bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics.

“We break it down to the very simplest thing,” Coleman said. “You could make yourself nuts by researching everything you're going to use.”

The goal, she said, is for people to start taking the actions they can, then maybe graduating to lobbying for more rules and regulations to limit the potentially harmful materials.

In Central Oregon, GreenSavers staff can help make a home more healthy as part of its home performance test, said Kendra Van Note, who does community outreach and education for the Bend company. It can check appliances like hot water heaters and range ovens for gas or carbon monoxide leaks, and check the indoor air quality and the vents to ensure air circulates properly, she said.

The staff also advise people to do things like check drainage around their houses to ensure water doesn't pool, leading to mold or moisture issues.

“The more people can be aware of keeping their home a healthy environment, it's a benefit to everybody,” Van Note said.

Kate Ramsayer can be reached at 541-617-7811 or at [kramsayer@bendbulletin.com](mailto:kramsayer@bendbulletin.com).



Published Daily in Bend Oregon by Western Communications, Inc. © 2010

[www.bendbulletin.com](http://www.bendbulletin.com)

## **BATHROOM:**

- Are there any signs of mold or mildew in the shower, sink, windowsill, walls or ceiling?
- Is your bathroom fan able to draw a piece of tissue toward itself?
- Do you have a plastic or vinyl shower curtain?
- Do your lotions, shampoos and personal care products list ingredients?



## **OUTSIDE:**

- Are you located near a busy street or parking lot where cars run their engines?
- Do you routinely remove shoes before entering the home?
- Do you use chemical fertilizer, weed and feed, weed killer or pesticides?
- Do you use insect repellents on your skin or in the yard?





**CHILDREN'S ROOM:**

- Do you have any metal costume jewelry?
- Is your child's mattress covered in plastic, or does it have a "chemical" smell?
- Do you have nursing pillows or stuffed toys with exposed stuffing?
- Does your child have art supplies or playthings that were not originally made for children?



## On the Web

To download the Oregon Environmental Council's Eco-Healthy Homes Checkup Kit: [www.oeonline.org/our-work/kidshealth/tinyfootprints/eco-healthy-homes-checkup-kit](http://www.oeonline.org/our-work/kidshealth/tinyfootprints/eco-healthy-homes-checkup-kit).

### INDOORS:

- What materials do you use to cover living area floors?
- Do your windows open and close?
- Do you see cracked or peeling paint near windows, doors or baseboards?
- How is your heat/air conditioning delivered?

### KITCHEN:

- Do you use only cold tap water for cooking?
- Have you examined reusable containers like baby bottles, cups and lunch boxes?
- Do you choose organic or pesticide-free produce?
- Are there any signs of pests (gnaw marks, droppings or

moths)?

**CHILDREN'S ROOM:**

- Do you have any metal costume jewelry?
- Is your child's mattress covered in plastic, or does it have a "chemical" smell?
- Do you have nursing pillows or stuffed toys with exposed stuffing?
- Does your child have art supplies or playthings that were not originally made for children?

**OUTSIDE:**

- Are you located near a busy street or parking lot where cars run their engines?
- Do you routinely remove shoes before entering the home?
- Do you use chemical fertilizer, weed and feed, weed killer or pesticides?
- Do you use insect repellents on your skin or in the yard?

**BATHROOM:**

- Are there any signs of mold or mildew in the shower, sink, windowsill, walls or ceiling?
- Is your bathroom fan able to draw a piece of tissue toward itself?
- Do you have a plastic or vinyl shower curtain?
- Do your lotions, shampoos and personal care products list ingredients?

On the Web