WORDS TO THE WISE

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Waiting to Inhale

During the winter months, homeowners typically spend more time indoors. That makes winter a good time to look at indoor air quality issues and potential ways to resolve them.

You can immediately tell the quality of the air when you leave something on the stove too long. The air quickly begins to smell unpleasant, and the resulting scorched food may cause smoke to fill the room. Your indoor air quality has definitely taken a turn for the worse, but turning off the stove and opening a window (thereby improving ventilation) usually resolves the problem.

As demonstrated by smoke and smell, burnt food can cause indoor air pollution, as a result of gases or particles beings released into the air. Other factors involved in poor indoor air quality include inadequate ventilation, as well as high temperature and humidity levels, creating a breeding ground for mold and other contaminants.

What are some of the sources of indoor air pollution, besides burnt food? There is a wide range of contaminants, and most people have experienced at least a few of them. When oil, gas, coal, wood or tobacco is ignited inside, these substances release gases and odors.

If you've ever had a flooded basement, you know that wet or damp carpeting, cabinetry, paper or cloth can result in indoor pollution and breathing hazards. Sprays and mists from products as ordinary as household cleaners, adhesives and personal care items can cause noxious odors. Outdoor sources such as radon, pesticides and outdoor air pollution from vehicles and planes simply add to the problem.

Depending on their use, some products and materials may pollute intermittently. For example, contaminants from smoking, cleaning or personal care products are released only when in use. Other potential sources of pollution, such as building materials or furnishings, may release gases or particulates almost continuously.

Knowing how outdoor air enters a home can help in reducing indoor pollutants. Outdoor air enters and leaves a house through a variety of ways. Some are obvious – open a door or window and air flows through. Yet even when windows and doors are closed, some air, know as infiltrating air, still enters a home through small openings, joints and cracks in walls, floors and ceilings. Air flow, or movement, is caused during infiltration and natural ventilation (deliberate opening of doors or windows) by wind and temperature variations. Mechanical means, such as fans and duct work, can also serve to move and distribute air.

Some of the ways to improve indoor air quality are obvious. Stop using harsh chemicals indoors, monitor what you spray and burn, and when dinner is burned, open a window.

In other cases, it may not be possible to completely reduce indoor air pollutants, but you may be able to reduce indoor emissions. If there is a problem such as asbestos, this material can be removed, sealed or enclosed. If a gas stove is leaking, it can be adjusted. amount. It is often less expensive to fix the problem at the source, rather than increasing ventilation, because added ventilation may lead to higher energy costs.

However, increased ventilation is always the right course when involved in short-term, high pollution activities such as painting, welding, soldering or sanding. It is preferable to engage in some of these activities outside, when possible.

Advanced designs of new homes are starting to feature mechanical systems that bring outdoor air into the home. In addition, many types and sizes of air cleaners are available for purchase, ranging from lower priced table top models to much more sophisticated (and expensive) whole-house systems. However effective they may be, air cleaners are generally not designed to remove gas emission from a home.

And while the data is incomplete, indoor plants have been suggested as a method of improving indoor air quality. Do your own experiment, as long as you don't over-water. Over-watering can promote the growth of microorganisms and aggravate allergies.

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