

Hazards in the Home

Indoor Air Pollution

Appliances

The hazards from appliances such as fires, gas leaks or electric shock, are well known. Other dangers are:

Fuel Burning Appliances

All fuel-burning appliances use up fresh air as they burn, and give off waste gases.

Carbon monoxide (CO), kills nearly 1000 people every year according to the National Poisons Information Service. It is given off by any appliance designed to burn gas, oil, coal or wood.

Symptoms

CO is colourless, tasteless and odourless, so you can be exposed over a long period without realising it. Victims may feel generally unwell, with nausea, headaches, tiredness, confusion, lack of concentration, vomiting and diarrhoea - symptoms similar to flu, so difficult to diagnose. If you suspect CO poisoning, seek medical advice.

Gas flames also give off other pollution that causes a reaction in the lungs, producing body chemicals called **cytokines**. These could cause breathing problems.¹

Electrical Appliances

About 125,000 homes in the UK could have high levels of electromagnetic radiation in them and 80% of these are not even close to pylons.² This is because modern homes have so many electrical appliances.



Electromagnetic fields (EMFs), are created wherever there is a flow of electricity. Concerns surround a possible link between EMFs and problems with the reproductive system, the immune system and the brain and central nervous system. They have also been linked to cancers such as leukaemia.³

Sensitivity to EMFs is similar to chemical sensitivity, with much the same allergic reaction.⁴ The electrical charge also reacts with pollutants already in the air which allows chemicals to penetrate the body more easily.²

Common houseplants such as ivy or palms are good for removing toxins from indoor air.

What you can do

To combat fumes:

Ventilation is important. Always make sure fresh air can get in to a room and fumes can get out. Never block vents or air bricks.

An indication of a problem is sooty stains around a gas fire, yellow or orange flames in gas fires or water heaters. If you suspect a problem call 0800 111999 and ask for an expert to come out. This service is free.

Don't put yourself at risk. People entering fume-filled rooms to rescue an unconscious person can be overcome within seconds. Open the door to ventilate the room (unless the building is on fire) and call the ambulance and fire services.

If you feel unwell after being in a room, or even in a room above, where a fuel-burning appliance is in use, open doors and windows and turn off the appliance. Seek medical advice immediately. Do not use, or let anyone else use, the suspect appliance until it has been checked by an expert.⁵

All electrical appliances and wiring circuits emit EMFs, so it is best to be cautious and minimise exposure to them whenever possible. Walls don't significantly reduce them either, but they do drop off with distance, so ensure that places where you spend long periods of time are at least 4 feet from appliances that are working.⁴

Appliances still give off radiation when on stand-by, or when left on at the mains. So switch devices off when not in use, especially in the bedroom.

Sources of Information

1. London Hazards Centre, www.lhc.org.uk/
2. The Liverpool Daily Post (07.03.01)
3. Ethical Consumer Magazine (issue 56). www.ethicalconsumer.org
4. Powerwatch, 0897 100 800, www.powerwatch.org.uk
5. Channel 4 Television (2000) *Poisoned*, London

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