



Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is a Healthy Home?

A healthy home is designed, constructed, rehabilitated, and maintained in a manner that supports the health of the occupants and is free of hazards that can adversely affect human health through biological, physical, physiological, or chemical exposure.

Q: Why are Healthy and Safe Homes Important to Families in the U.S.?

The science is clear. Healthy homes lead to healthier lives. In June 2009, the US Surgeon General issued a Call to Action to Promote Healthy Homes. The Call to Action documented the following health outcomes that could be achieved through healthier homes:

- Reduced heart disease rates from improved indoor air quality;
- Reduced adult injuries from preventable falls;
- Reduced asthma attacks; and
- Precious children's lives saved from preventable fire, suffocation, and drowning.

These opportunities are too great to ignore – and no one is immune from the effects of unhealthy and unsafe homes. They affect the health of millions of people of all income levels, geographic areas, and walks of life in the U.S.

Q: What Factors Lead to Unhealthy and Unsafe Homes?

Factors that lead to unhealthy and unsafe homes include:

- how the home is designed, constructed, and maintained,
- its physical characteristics,
- the absence of safety devices,
- the presence of toxic hazardous chemicals, and
- the quality of water and indoor air.

Q: How Many People are Impacted by This Problem?

Too often we hear tragic stories resulting from completely preventable but common hazards –that affect the health and safety of residents such as house fires caused by smoking or electrical hazards, carbon monoxide poisoning, poor lighting, lack of handrails on stairs, open upper-story windows, improperly stored firearms, poisonous substances, and inadequate supervision of children around bathtubs and pools. No longer can we disregard the statistics documenting the impact of unhealthy homes:

- Secondhand smoke causes an estimated 38,112 lung cancer and heart disease deaths a year, and radon exposure causes 21,000 lung cancer deaths.
- Carbon monoxide causes 450 deaths and 15,000 emergency room visits a year.
- Death in a house fire is 50% more likely in homes without smoke alarms.
- Falls account for 54% of unintentional injuries in homes.
- Exposure to dampness/mold aggravates asthma and results in \$3.5 billion in health care and other costs each year.

- National estimates indicate that radon gas above the EPA action level is found in 1 of 15 homes and there are 1.2 million homes with lead based paint hazards and young children.

Q: Who is Most Affected by Unhealthy and Unsafe Housing?

All population groups, regardless of geography and socioeconomic status are susceptible to these hazards. However, some populations are disproportionately affected. Residents of poorly maintained homes, minority populations, the elderly, and people with disabilities are at increased risk for illness and injury. Because of this, achieving healthy and safe homes can also help to reduce disparities in health.

Q: What Can be Done About This Problem?

We can prevent many diseases and injuries that result from health hazards in the home. Concerted efforts on all levels will result in a reduction of the alarming statistics, an increase in the availability of healthy and affordable housing, and many more Americans enjoying the benefits of healthier, longer, more productive lives. Everyone in a community has an integral role to play in ensuring healthy homes.

- Individuals can make their homes healthy by improving air quality, safely using safety devices, adequately supervising children, properly storing firearms, and controlling or eliminating toxic chemicals.
- Organizations can educate at-risk populations about the connection between health and homes, and how to identify and address home deficiencies.
- Healthcare providers can incorporate healthy housing solutions into their protocols including training of home visit staff.
- The building, remodeling, housing finance, and real estate communities can deliver affordable safe and healthy housing to homebuyers and renters.
- Agencies, organizations and individuals can join the National Safe and Healthy Housing Coalition to advocate for safer healthier homes for all families.
- And finally, the government can help create homes that are affordable and improve people’s health.

Q: What is the National Safe and Healthy Housing Coalition?

The National Safe and Healthy Housing Coalition is a broad, voluntary, non-dues coalition of organizations working to improve housing conditions nationwide, especially for low-income families, through education and outreach to key national stakeholders and federal public decision-makers. Guided by a 16-member Steering Committee that is chaired by the National Center for Healthy Housing, the Coalition’s primary mission is to implement a *National Healthy Housing Action Plan* that emanated from the first-ever National Healthy Housing Summit, held in Washington, D.C. on May 7, 2009. The top priorities included: Gaining coverage of home-based asthma interventions for children with uncontrolled asthma; working collectively to pass U.S. Senator Jack Reed’s two bills: the *Healthy Housing Council Act of* and the *National Healthy Housing Act*; advocating for sustainable funding/appropriations of current healthy housing programs; and supporting the *Community Building Code Administration Grant Act*



Background

Some Housing in the U.S. Rivals the Developing World's

The home is the most dangerous place for U.S. families, according to CDC injury and illness data. An estimated 5.7 million families in the U.S. live in housing that rivals developing countries, with broken heating and plumbing, holes in walls and windows, roaches, rats, falling plaster, and leaking roofs. Millions more in all 50 states live in housing with serious health and safety hazards, according to the *State of the Nation's Healthy Housing* (see www.nchh.org).

Unhealthy Housing Causes Millions of Illnesses and Injuries and Costs Taxpayers Billions

Lead Poisoning: An estimated 250,000 children have blood lead levels greater than CDC's level of concern; millions more have levels high enough to cause irreparable harm. About 24 million homes have lead-based paint hazards which, when combined with other environmental toxins, cause lead poisoning, cancer, and other illnesses and results in \$52.9 billion in annual costs.

Asthma from Mold, Roaches and other Triggers: Of the 22.9 million Americans with asthma (the most prevalent chronic childhood illness), about 4.6 million cases are caused by mold, mildew, roaches, mice, dust mites, cleaning agents, and other triggers. These largely preventable cases result in \$3.5 billion/year in treatment and related costs (e.g., missed work/school days), according to the Institutes of Medicine.

Cancer: Radon is the leading cause of lung cancer among non-smokers and kills approximately 21,000 annually (more than drunk driving), according to the EPA. Pesticide exposure in and around the home only increases these cancer risks.

Unintentional Injuries: About half of all injuries – from falls, fires, poisonings, scaldings and other hazards – occur in and around the home and cost \$222 billion in direct medical expenses each year, according to CDC and others.

Children, the Elderly and Other Vulnerable Populations Suffer the Most

Low-income families, minorities, children and the elderly suffer disproportionately from substandard housing, 95% of which are private rental units or owner-occupied houses, according to the American Housing Survey and other sources.

Simple Fixes Save Many Lives, Avoid Countless Illnesses/Injuries and Save Billions

Nearly all of these hazards have cost-effective and often simple fixes. For example:

- **Asthma:** A home assessment, asthma and trigger avoidance education, and reducing home-based triggers (e.g., closed food containers, mattress/pillow encasements and HEPA vacuum filters) significantly improve patient health and greatly reduces treatment costs.
- **Falls:** Replacing missing stair handrails, repairing slippery flooring, broken steps and inadequate lighting, and adding grab bars and baby safety gates save many lives and limbs.