

# Don't sweep health hazards under carpet

By Amanda Davey

How healthy is your home? It's an interesting question because most of us are so focused on practising good hygiene - hopefully that's the case anyway - that we tend to neglect other potential health hazards in and around the home.

Carpets, paint, cabinetry, decking, floorboards and even furniture all contain toxic compounds that are apparently not quite as innocuous as manufacturers would lead us to believe.

As a result, your home could be suffering from sick building syndrome, which doesn't augur well for those who reside within its toxic walls and are oblivious to an environment full of microscopic nasties.

Paradoxically though, it's the new or renovated homes, not the dusty old ones, that appear to be posing problems for inhabitants.

Avalon-based interior designers, Sharon Hamilton and Darryn Parkinson are so concerned about the potential health risks associated with indoor air pollutants from introduced toxic compounds that they are now offering a specialised interior design service that provides advice on creating green interiors.

However, as Ms Hamilton pointed out, finding suitable alternatives to conventional products isn't as simple as it sounds.

"We are constantly looking for suitable alternatives because the more research we do, the more we are completely convinced it's the right way to be doing things," she said.

"But this takes time because

everything we recommend should be low in volatile organic compounds (VOCs), even the glues and adhesives."

The couple is so convinced that products with low VOCs are the only safe options for home interiors, that they believe the interior design industry as a whole should also adopt these seemingly safe practices.

"As industry professionals, we cannot be specifying products to our clients that could potentially lead to health problems. This industry needs to fundamentally change the way it's doing things - even down to the stuffing in soft furnishings or the flame retardants and stain-proofing on new upholstery."

So what harm can these chemicals do to us?

Recent animal studies have shown that flame retardants (PBDEs) affect thyroid function and can impair the developing central nervous system and brain in utero, although human studies have been less conclusive.

"VOCs have been linked with a range of health issues from headaches, skin irritations and respiratory problems right through to asthma but it's very hard to find solid evidence that these conditions are caused by a particular chemical compound.

"Hundreds of these chemicals are in use in our daily lives but only a fraction of them have been tested on humans. My concern is that there's enough links and anecdotal evidence to make you question whether the rises asthma, allergies and chemical sensitivities is due to VOCs."

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Sharon Hamilton and Darryn Parkinson here with daughter Sophia have a business specialising in healthy, green interiors using low VOC products.  
Picture: ANNIKA ENDERBORG GAH03537



# Healthy home is essential

Darryn Parkinson and Sharon Hamilton have a business specialising in healthy, green interiors using low-VOC products.  
Picture: ANNIKA ENDERBORG

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"We are not questioning what we are putting in our homes and importantly the potential danger from the interplay of all of these chemicals."

While a number of paint and carpet brands are now manufacturing products with low VOCs, Ms Hamilton says it is a lot harder to find green alternatives to conventional furnishings.

She advises her clients to steer away from foam and instead go for pure products like wool, cotton, hemp, or natural laytex.

She also recommends opting for water or plant based finishes on floorboards rather than the more common polyurethane finish and choosing a manufacturer that uses glues, adhesives and binders minus formaldehyde, a known carcinogenic.

"Most importantly, ensure you ventilate your house well.

"If you work all day and it's closed up from morning till night, try to open the place up when you get home and let the fresh air in."

In coming weeks Ms Hamilton will be

appearing on a new TV series, *Is Your House Killing you?*, currently screening on SBS at 7.30 on Wednesdays.

She is also holding a workshop at the Manly Ocean Care Day Festival on Sunday, December 2, at 3pm.

Entitled "Home Renovating the Non-Toxic Way", the workshop will be highlighting issues around some of the more widely used products and materials in renovating and will offer safe alternatives with the opportunity to see samples of the non-toxic product.