

**C**ould your furniture be slowly killing you? Or at the very least giving off gases that irritate your eyes, nose and throat? That's the question a growing number of big retailers are asking their suppliers.

A lack of national standards means chemical levels in furnishings don't have to be tested. That's bad news, because some substances can stay in the goods for their entire life, slowly leaching into the air as volatile organic compounds (VOCs). In the average home there's a potentially harmful cocktail of 200 or 300 compounds floating about.

Larger retailers such as Harvey Norman conduct voluntarily checks on the level of formaldehyde in the fabric of furniture they import, especially from countries such as China. However, smaller operators, particularly at the budget end of the market, are unlikely to do so.

Marcus Nelson, national furniture co-ordinator for Harvey Norman and Domayne, says they reject goods that don't comply with European Union standards.

"The main one we're concerned with is fabric because a lot of it comes from China and sometimes

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# Toxic by design

Some furniture items should come with a health warning.

the standards over there can be a little questionable," Nelson says.

Where possible, Harvey Norman encourages consumers to buy Australian-made. "Some of the standards in the factories [in China] are just nowhere near as high as Australian standards are," Nelson says.

"There's a lot of stuff out there in the marketplace, particularly imported stuff, that

doesn't meet EU standards and it's all to hit a price." Harvey Norman wants the Government to introduce national standards, because at the moment there isn't "an even playing field out there".

The adoption of green building codes for commercial spaces means a few companies that make office furniture have begun to monitor VOCs in their products. But Sharon Hamilton, the interior design director of eco-friendly company Your Abode, says it's almost impossible to find businesses

focused solely on making low-VOC furniture for homes.

Hamilton says most retailers wouldn't know what VOCs the products they stock give off, and consumers should seek out companies that make and sell their own furniture.

She suggests buying furniture made of solid wood that has been

finished with a low-VOC product such as linseed oil or beeswax.

If goods are painted, you should ask for a plant- or mineral-based coating. For fabric or filling, it's best to look for a natural fibre such as organic hemp, wool, cotton or linen that hasn't been treated with a fire retardant or a stain protector.

For kitchen and bathroom cabinets, the Laminex Group produces some low-emission reconstituted timber board products.

Dr Steve Brown, principal research scientist with the CSIRO's Sustainable Ecosystems, says the VOCs floating about the average home can be up to five times more concentrated than in the outside air.

Air tends to be more polluted in new homes, but becomes less so after six months to a year. The best way to improve air quality is to open up windows and use fans to circulate the air.

Brown says that because Australia doesn't have an independent labelling scheme for VOCs in furnishings, consumers need to quiz retailers and manufacturers about what's in their products. But he concedes that no furniture manufacturer has invited the CSIRO to test all of the compounds its products off-gas, despite the science body having testing facilities available.

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