

# Are you breathing in toxins?

By Amanda Davey

What do carpets, paint, household cleaners and building materials have in common?

Unfortunately, all contain toxic compounds that are apparently not quite as innocuous as manufacturers would lead us to believe.

As a result, your very own home could be suffering from the "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.

According to the CSIRO's chief of atmospheric research, Dr Graeme Pearman, for many of us, our main exposure to air pollutants will be when we are indoors, such as at home, in the workplace or in entertainment venues.

His colleague, Steve Brown, who was recently awarded the prestigious Grimwade Prize in industrial chemistry for his research into indoor air pollutants summed up the situation by saying, "our daily exposure to a potent cocktail of these pollutants may be costing Australia as much as \$12 billion a year due to ill health".

But before you run outside for a bit of fresh air or start hyperventilating with acute anxiety for health of your nearest and dearest, remember that most of us survive the dangers of indoor living without too much of a problem.

That said, recent studies have shown that in Australia the incidence of asthma



A client listens to building consultants Sharon and Darryn Parkinson.

and allergies, especially in children, is on the rise, leading many authorities to believe that there is a connection between the environments in which we live and work and the state of our health.

The CSIRO estimates that occupants of new homes in particular may be exposed to many times the maximum allowable limits of some indoor air pollutants.

Darryn Parkinson and his business partner, Sharon Hamilton, run *your abode*, an outfit of interior and building designers based in Avalon.

Passionate about the environment and their corporate responsibility, they create green homes, renovations and interiors.

"Creating a green interior should be thought about early on in the design process," Mr Parkinson said.

"After occupying a new or renovated home, many people are exposed to high levels of indoor pollutants."

"I've lost count of the number of times I've seen brand new nurseries with new paint, new furniture and new carpet,

### Tips to keep in mind

Mr Parkinson suggests the following tips for healthy, green interiors:

- Use low or zero-VOC paint and floor finishes;
- Insist on low-formaldehyde emission material for kitchen cabinets;
- When installing new carpet, insist on natural jute underlay, natural fibres and have the carpet aired before installation;
- Avoid furnishing and upholstery fabrics containing fire retardants and fabric protectants; and
- When designing your home ensure it can be adequately ventilated to improve indoor air quality.

with this young baby placed in this room full of toxins.

"A lot of these materials and products are emitting volatile organic compounds (VOC) and the long-term effects aren't known.

"What we do know is that new paint can be emitting toxins for up to six months and other products like glues or underlays, for up to a year or two."

Paradoxically, it's the new homes, not the dusty old ones, that appear to be posing a problem for residents but there are ways to ensure your home is safe for all and sundry.