

ALLERGIES IN THE HOME

Is your home making you sick? Sneezing, itchy watering eyes, wheezing, a runny nose are all signs of allergies. When these symptoms arrive we are quick to blame pollen and other outside allergens, but what about the irritants that are inside the home? Researchers confirm that the home not only contains many sources of allergies including dust, mold and animal dander but also tends to intensify allergic reactions due to restricted airflow. Although it is impossible to eradicate all indoor irritants, you can take preventative steps to dramatically decrease the likelihood and/or duration of allergic reactions. Time spent identifying and limiting the source of allergies in the home, as any chronic allergy sufferer will verify, is well worth it considering the daily misery of allergy symptoms.

1. Dust and Dust Mites – Dust mites are tiny spider like insects invisible to the naked eye. Their droppings and carcasses are potent allergens. Did you know? According to Dr. Koehler of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, "The average bed contains 10,000 dust mites...A two year old pillow can get about one tenth of its weight from mites, dead mites, and their droppings". To counteract this fact you can cover pillows, mattresses and box springs. Bedding should be washed often in very hot water (over 60 degrees Celsius). Frequent dusting with a damp cloth and routine vacuuming of carpets, curtains, furniture and mattresses will minimize any dust build up. Vacuums can actually redistribute dust around your home if the bag has not been changed in awhile. Ensure that any filtering devices in your home including your furnace filter and air vents are clean. If you live in a dusty environment you may want to purchase an electronic air cleaner. Similarly, a dehumidifier can be used to drop the humidity level to less than 40 percent, effectively minimizing dust buildup.
2. Pets – Animal dander contains skin, fur or hair shed or secreted from an animal. Many allergy sufferers are not only allergic to animal dander but also animal saliva. Pets should be kept in restricted areas (i.e. not allowed into the bedroom or kept to the floor area). If your animals are outside a lot, you may want to bath them more frequently to cut

down on the tracking in of irritating pollens. Frequent vacuuming (once to twice a week) will reduce the amount of airborne dander in your home.

3. Moulds and Mildew – Showers, tubs, walls and floors can all accumulate moulds and mildews especially in the bathroom areas. Purchase a mildew remover and use it daily after taking a shower. Occasional airing out of the house and low humidity levels will help control mold. Potted plants can develop mould and should be examined frequently or avoided altogether.
4. Household Chemicals – Chemicals inside your home can aggravate an allergic reaction by lowering your immune system or by irritating sensitive mucous membranes such as lungs, nasal passages, or eyes. Formaldehydes, paints, personal care products, and cleaning products are common aggravators. You may want to consider this before you pile on the cleaners in an effort to decrease other allergens. It may be doing you more harm than good.
5. By limiting exposure to the above-mentioned irritants, you can reduce allergy symptoms. However, the climate, season and type of house you live in, among other factors, are not within your immediate control. Did you know? Energy Efficient Homes – Super-Insulated homes (triple glazed windows and sealed cracks) may cut down on your energy consumption but will increase allergen levels. Some studies suggest that the level of allergens is over 200% higher in energy efficient homes because they keep the allergens contained inside the home. All in all, you cannot completely rid your life of allergies but a little effort combined with some knowledge can go a long way.

THE “HOME HUNTERS”

Grant & Steve Hunter

HEALTHY RENOVATIONS IN THE BEDROOM WILL IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP

A proper night's rest has a positive effect on mental clarity, energy, memory and even coordination. Most of us spend one third of our lives in bed. Consequently, the air quality in the bedroom is particularly important. Poor sleep can be caused by a number of factors including airborne allergens.

Often, the sufferer may mistake allergic reactions with a cold virus or other internal factors. For some the symptoms may have persisted for so long the allergic reactions seem normal.

If you suffer any of the following symptoms on a regular basis you may have allergens in your bedroom. The U.S. National Institutes of Health compiled the following list of symptoms:

- Sneezing often accompanied by a runny or clogged nose
- Coughing and postnasal drip
- Itching eyes, nose, and throat
- Allergic shiners (dark circles under the eyes caused by increased blood flow near the sinuses)
- The "allergic salute" (in a child, persistent upward rubbing of the nose that causes a crease mark on the nose)
- Watering eyes
- Conjunctivitis (an inflammation of the membrane that lines the eyelids, causing red-rimmed, swollen eyes, and crusting of the eyelids.)

In people who are not allergic, inhaled particles are either coughed out or moved down the throat. In the sensitive person, a chain reaction occurs which releases histamine and other chemicals. These powerful chemicals contract certain cells that line some small blood vessels in the nose. The result is

swelling and congestion in the nasal passages.

What most allergy sufferers may not know is that there is something they can do to make their home a healthier place to live.

The materials that go into building and renovating a house affect the indoor air quality. Using healthy building materials means you will breathe more easily at home.

To get a rough idea of the health of the air in your bedroom leave the doors and windows closed all day then take a deep breath. What do you smell? Is it musty? This means there is mold in the air. Some types of mold are toxic so it is imperative that the problem should be addressed. Look for sources of moisture in the room and specific areas that are moist and warm. You may have a leak or condensation problem.

A smell is an indication there are substances in the air carrying an odour. Old blankets or towels stashed in a cupboard could be the culprit or it may be a damp piece of rug near the window.

Particleboard is commonly used in furniture such as desks and beds. The board is comprised of wood particles held together with glue. The glue emits noxious compounds in minute amounts. For sensitive people the amounts are high enough to trigger a reaction. Two simple ways to identify particleboard is to look for an absence of wood grain and to consider the weight of the object; particleboard is very heavy. While some European countries have demanded board made with low-emission glue, it is not consistently available in Canada at this time.

Carpets and carpet pads can contribute to off gassing as well as act as a gathering place for dirt and moisture and a breeding ground for dust mites, mold and bacteria. The healthiest solution is to replace carpets with hard-finish flooring such as ceramic tiles or hardwood and use natural fibre area rugs that are not glued to the floor.

Anti-stain compounds sprayed on furniture can also contribute noxious fumes

to the air you breathe all night.

None of these scenarios alone may be a problem but when combined they turn the air into a chemical soup.

Although the true health risks are not well established, many authorities advise caution around some electrical appliances that generate electromagnetic fields (EMFs). Minimize electric appliances near the bed or other areas where you spend considerable time.

Due to the direct relationship between poor air quality and health problems, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) has done some extensive research on the topic and offers information for consumers.

To help homeowners assess the health of their home and make practical renovations, CMHC has created the Healthy Housing Renovation Planner. The Planner is a practical and interactive 300–page guide to planning a renovation – whether you are hiring a contractor or doing the work yourself. It includes money–saving project worksheets, a comparison of building materials, a video, and the results of 16 years of housing research and expertise compiled from 130 studies. CMHC's Healthy Housing Renovations Planner costs \$34.95 and can be ordered [online](#).

In 1997, CMHC published Building Materials for the Environmentally Hypersensitive, a practical sourcebook detailing common building materials and the health issues associated with them. This comprehensive guide helps persons with asthma, allergies and other environmental sensitivities choose healthy building materials for their homes. The cost is \$29.95 can be ordered [online](#).

Tips for healthy renovations in the bedroom:

- Do not use pressed wood for mattress support as this material emits gases.
- Minimize use of pressed wood furniture in the bedroom. If these products cannot be avoided, seal all surfaces.

- Carpets and carpet pads can act as a gathering place for dirt and moisture and breeding grounds for dust mites, mold and bacteria. It's healthier to use hard-finish flooring with natural fibre area rugs.
- Fix leaks or condensation problems, which can lead to the growth of molds.
- Avoid anti-stain furniture sprays.

Taking a few of these precautions will not only reduce the coughing, sneezing and congestion of allergic reactions, you may also have a wonderful sleep.

THE "HOME HUNTERS"

Grant & Steve Hunter

IS YOUR NEW NURSERY HEALTHY FOR YOUR BABY?

On the surface the image looks pretty serene – parent and infant rocking gently in a big chair in the room freshly painted and carpeted for its new inhabitant....

On closer inspection, all may not be right. If done incorrectly, the renovation of a baby's room can turn this space from lullaby land into a chemical soup.

Decorating their new baby's room is an exciting project for expectant parents but, there are many potential hazards in this important project. A common mistake, for example, happens when choosing paint. Look for a low-toxicity water-based paint as these are considered safer than conventional latex paint which can give off noxious fumes. If you decide to paint, do it early. If the room still smells of paint when a baby or child moves in, chances are the paint is still giving off dangerous emissions. If you use a low-odour paint, you will be able to use the room much sooner. Many parents decide to wallpaper babies' or children's rooms. Wallpaper and their glues emit irritants. Wallpapers are made of vinyl and the adhesives contain chemicals to prevent moulds. Wallpapers get mouldy when indoor moisture is high. Although it is a common belief that natural materials are healthier than synthetic ones, this isn't always the case. Some natural resin and linseed paints, used for interior trims and doors, give off odours that some people find irritating.

Be careful when choosing new furniture for your little one's room. Furniture made from particle board emits fumes which can be harmful to babies and young children.

Some parents choose to put humidifiers in children's bedrooms although they may not be necessary in damper environments. Residential humidifiers should be used with caution as they accumulate dust and debris which will support the growth of bacteria and fungi. If you do choose to use a humidifier, be sure it is cleaned and maintained regularly. Some types of vaporizers also give off respirable particles coming from minerals dissolved in the tap water.

Most carpet is made using synthetic latex backing, which is a source of long-term emission. Look for carpets that have been made without latex bonding.

An even healthier choice is hardwood or tile flooring. If sanding the floor yourself, isolate the area carefully and use a central vacuum vented to the outside or one with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter to clean up the dust. Use a finish for the hardwood that is water-based and low odour.

Canada's authority on housing, CMHC, has taken a special interest in healthy housing renovations and indoor air quality. Because of the direct relationship between poor air quality and health problems, CMHC has done extensive research in the area and offers consumers a renovator's kit that addresses these issues.

Tips for healthy renovation of a baby's or child's room

- Most carpet is made using synthetic latex backing which is a source of long-term emission. Look for carpets that have been made without latex bonding or use hard, smooth flooring.
- Ensure that the wood flooring is solid wood, not pressed wood.
- Exposure to odours is avoided by installing pre-finished wood flooring.
- If sanding the floor yourself, isolate the area carefully and use a vacuum exhausted to the outside or one with a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter.
- If painting, buy low odour water-based paints.
- Be aware that wallpapers and their glues emit irritants. Wallpapers can become moldy in the presence of moisture.
- Natural materials aren't always healthier than synthetic ones. Some natural resin and linseed paints, used for interior trims and doors, or linseed oil-base floor coverings, give off irritating odours.
- It is best to avoid particle-board furniture as it gives off emissions. Use solid wood or seal all exposed surfaces and edges completely.
- Use a humidifier only if you are sure it is necessary and you clean it regularly.
- Be aware of sources of pollutants from other parts of the house.

*To order CMHC's Healthy Housing Renovations kit for \$24.95, Building Materials for the Environmentally Hypersensitive for \$29.95 or other housing publications contact your nearest CMHC office or CMHC's web site at www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca.
Calgary (403) 515-3000 .*

THE "HOME HUNTERS" - Grant & Steve Hunter

IS ASBESTOS HIDING IN YOUR HOME?

Most people now know that asbestos is hazardous. What may not be well known however, is that severe illness can develop even twenty years after exposure and despite the dangers, asbestos continues to be used in many products for our homes. According to the American Lung Association, there are more than 3,000 products in use today which contain asbestos. Most of these are products or component materials used for fire proofing, roofing, flooring, heat and acoustic insulation.

Asbestos refers to a group of naturally occurring silicate minerals with the ability to separate into fibers. Chrysotile is the most commonly used type in North America. Much of that is mined in Canada although large deposits are also found in California. When it's usefulness was first discovered, it seemed like a revolutionary material-cheap, durable, fire proof, and a great insulator. In most products, a binding agent is added to prevent the fibers from becoming airborne but the binder is not completely effective. In the mid-1970s the health effects became known and they are dire.

Numerous forms of cancer have been associated with asbestos including cancer of the lungs, stomach, colon, ovaries, and esophagus. Asbestosis and mesothelioma (cancer of the pleura, the lining between the ribs and the lungs) are two ailments directly linked to asbestos. Cancer seems to be a malfunction in the body's immune response to the microscopic fibers which penetrate deeply into the lungs and can work their way into other parts of the body. As the body tries to neutralize the foreign particles by coating them with special proteins, scarring, reduced lung capacity and cancer can result. Although it is possible to ingest asbestos, the typical point of entry is the lungs. The fibers are so tiny that they can be inhaled undetected without triggering the normal cough reflex. Because people do not have an immediate reaction they are often unaware that they are in danger.

Asbestos is still a silent menace in many homes and offices. Anyone planning home renovations or purchasing a home should know where the hidden dangers are and which new products contain asbestos.

Products and Materials Containing Asbestos:

- shingles and siding
- roofing felt

- vinyl asbestos floor tiles
- acoustic ceiling material
- taping compounds and asbestos plaster
- pipe and duct insulation
- artificial fireplaces, logs and ash
- patching and spackling compounds
- aircell pads inside furnaces
- pipe lagging and pipe elbow mud
- ductwork insulation
- floor tiles
- electrical wires
- textured paints
- cements
- furnaces and furnace door gaskets
- pot holders and ironing board pads
- hair dryers
- toasters and other household appliances

Home renovations such as replacing old flooring or insulation can be particularly dangerous. There are no labels or warnings on preinstalled materials (or even many new products) to warn of the presence of asbestos. Great amounts of the harmful fibers can become airborne when the old material is ripped out. Use professional renovation companies or contact the Ministry of Environment for information on the proper protective gear. Standard paper nose and mouth masks are not sufficient barriers to asbestos. If you have concerns about a new product, contact the manufacturer. Although they may not be required to label it on their product, they should provide the information upon request.

If you are considering purchasing a home, a few precautions can ensure your

family's safety. The seller is required to declare the presence of asbestos on the Property Disclosure Statement (PDS). A seller who knowingly omits that information on the PDS can be sued in civil court if the buyer later finds out that the information was intentionally withheld. If the PDS declares that asbestos is not present but you have doubts you can hire a building inspector. Many houses were inspected for asbestos in the 1970's and 1980's and had the hazard removed. If this was done there should be a Removal Certificate along with the information about the property.

Remember that asbestos can be removed safely and that "sick" but otherwise perfect house is not necessarily a write-off. Today's technology makes it possible to remove asbestos safely and return a home to glowing health once again.

THE "HOME HUNTERS"

Grant & Steve Hunter

IS YOUR KITCHEN MAKING YOU SICK, LITERALLY?

Headaches, burning eyes, itching skin, trouble breathing - sound familiar? It does to more than one quarter of Canadians who suffer from allergies, asthma or environmental sensitivities.

Recent research has shown that sometimes the cause of this discomfort is close to home - in fact, it's in the home. Though we hear a lot about the dangers of outdoor air pollution, studies are now showing that the quality of air indoors can be many times worse than the air outside.

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), Canada's authority on housing, has done extensive research on indoor air quality and has some tools and tips to help Canadians improve the indoor environment.

For example, for people planning to renovate the kitchen, one of the most popular renovation projects, CMHC's publications have several suggestions.

First of all, it is helpful to think of your house as a system. One part of the home does not exist by itself. The home's indoor air quality is influenced by all the other parts of the house and how the house is used as a whole.

Since the kitchen is where most cooking, washing and cleaning happens, ventilation is particularly important. If you are installing a new range, use an effective exhaust fan or range hood vented directly to the outside to remove cooking odours and moisture. Fan noise is reduced if the motor is installed outside.

People who cook with gas stoves are exposed to combustion gases. To avoid this, either use sealed combustion gas stoves or wire the stove in such a way that the exhaust turns on every time the gas stove is used.

Solid surface counter tops and solid wood cabinets are emission-free unlike choices such as particleboard. Water-based floor and trim finishes have a low content of volatile organic compounds and are a good alternative to paints high in noxious fumes. If particleboard is used, seal all surfaces and edges with laminate or with sufficient coats of low-odour sealant. Use low odour latex-based paints when painting.

Hard finish flooring such as ceramic tiles are the best choice for the kitchen, followed by vinyl composition tiles. These avoid the emissions from volatile compounds found in carpets, linoleum and sheet vinyl flooring and the organic vapours in their cleaning compounds. Ceramic tiles are also easy to clean.

Before you wrap up your project, have a look under the sink. Despite their airtight containers, the collection of cleaners stored there are sending emissions into your home 24 hours a day. These are better boxed up and stored outside or placed in a

sealed container. Better yet, buy only non-toxic products.

To help home renovators make healthy choice, CMHC created the Healthy Housing Renovation Kit. The Kit contains This Clean House (video) and several publications which represent 16 years of housing research.

CMHC also publishes, Building Materials for the Environmental Hypersensitive, a practical sourcebook detailing over 200 common building and health issues associated with them. The first and only comprehensive guide of its kind in Canada, this book helps persons with asthma, allergies and other environmental sensitivities choose healthy building materials for their homes.

To order CMHC's Healthy Housing Renovations Kit for \$24.95, Building Materials for the Environmentally Hypersensitive for \$29.95 or other housing publications contact your nearest CMHC office or CMHC's web site at www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca. In Calgary, call 403-515-3000.

Tips for healthy renovation of the kitchen:

- Install a vented exhaust fan to remove cooking odours and moisture in the kitchen.
- Use an overhead range hood instead of a downdraft hood. One that is vented directly to the outside is much more effective than a charcoal-based recirculating type.
- Gas ranges can introduce potentially hazardous gases into the home. If buying one, get a sealed combustion gas stove which vents the combustion gases directly to the outside.
- Use solid surface counter tops and cupboards made of solid wood, or thoroughly sealed composite wood.
- Hard-finish, non-porous flooring such as glazed ceramic tiles are a good choice for the kitchen.
- Cleaning products stored under the sink give off noxious emissions so are better kept in sealed containers, or use only non-toxic products.

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MOLD

Mold is pervasive in our environment; it occurs indoors and outdoors. In nature, various molds work to decay leaves and trees, returning essential nutrients back into the soil. Mold has also served humankind through some very inventive applications. Experiments in the 1920s revealed that a species of mold, called Penicillium, when added to a sweet solution, released a chemical as part of its metabolic processes. That chemical became known as penicillin, a life-saving antibiotic. Molds also have a long history of use in cooking: they are essential to production of some cheeses such as blue cheese. Airborne molds and yeasts provide the leavening agent and distinctive flavour of sourdough bread. Inside our homes, however, mold can cause serious health problems and damage building structures.

Molds are microscopic fungi, a group of organisms that include mushrooms and yeasts. These organisms grow rapidly in the proper conditions and spread quickly through the release of spores into the air. Over 270 different types of molds have been identified in Canadian homes according to the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC).

Health Concerns

Molds produce allergens, irritants, and in some cases, potentially toxic substances known as mycotoxins. Inhaling spores or touching mold may cause allergic reactions such as sneezing, runny nose, red eyes, asthma attacks in sensitive individuals, and skin rash.

Exposure to mold can be more severe for infants and children, elderly people, pregnant women, individuals with allergies or respiratory conditions such as asthma, and people with weakened immune systems. Long-term exposure to indoor molds can eventually become dangerous for anyone.

Mold in Our Homes

Our homes can present the ideal habitat for molds to thrive. High indoor humidity (over 70%) is the main culprit in the overgrowth of mold. The following are a few noticeable signs of excess moisture in your home:

- Condensation on the inside of windowpanes
- A musty smell
- Discoloration on furniture *
- Rust on water pipes

Reducing Moisture

If you find your home has a moisture problem, it is essential to your health and the quality of your home to correct the problem as soon as possible. Because mold can spread rapidly, small problems should be taken care of before they become serious. Mold can discolour carpets, walls, furniture and curtains. Eventually, a mold problem left unchecked can lead to wood rot and structural damage. The following are recommended methods of reducing moisture:

- Indoor water leaks or spills should be completely dry within 24 hours to prevent the growth of molds. Open windows and use fans if necessary.
- Vent appliances that produce moisture, such as dishwashers, clothes dryers, stoves, and kerosene heaters to the outside where possible. (Combustion appliances such as stoves and kerosene heaters produce water vapor and will increase the humidity unless vented to the outside.)
- Run the bathroom fan or open the window when showering. Use exhaust fans or open windows whenever cooking, running the dishwasher or dishwashing, etc.
- Increase ventilation or air movement by opening doors and/or windows, when practical. Use fans as needed.
- Use de-humidifiers when needed.
- Insulate cold water pipes where condensation is likely to occur.
- Consult a professional if you suspect you have rainwater penetration in your home. Any such problems should be corrected immediately.

Removing Mold

It is possible to correct small mold problems by removing the existing mold and implementing some of the previously mentioned methods to reduce moisture. CMHC recommends the following procedure for removing mold.

You can clean small areas on your own. A small area is defined as a maximum of three patches each less than a square metre in size. Clean using a detergent solution, safety goggles, household rubber gloves and a disposable dust mask (3M 8210 or equivalent) for protection. You may also use a few drops of bleach in a litre of water however, never mix bleach and detergent.

If mold is present on more than three square metres of your home's interior, assessment by a professional is recommended. The process of cleaning may result in a significant amount of airborne spores; a dust mask may not provide adequate protection. Consider consulting a professional to determine why the mold is there in the first place and correct it.

Considering how quickly mold organisms can reproduce, rapid action is the best approach. Correcting the problem will ensure you have a healthy and sound home for years to come.

THE "HOME HUNTERS"

Grant & Steve Hunter

QUIT SMOKING: IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF YOUR BODY AND YOUR HOME

Most people are aware of the harmful effects of cigarette smoking on the body. Yet many homeowners do not realize how damaging the habit can be to their homes not to mention the danger it presents to children and pets.

There are an estimated 4,000 chemicals in cigarette smoke, 50 of which are known or suspected cancer-causing agents according to Health Canada. Among these chemicals are benzene, tar, nicotine, hydrogen cyanide, formaldehyde (the chemical used to preserve frogs for science class), acetone (used in nail polish remover), and heavy metals such as cadmium, mercury and lead. Nicotine is the main addictive ingredient in cigarettes.

It is easy to see how second-hand smoke can be dangerous to non-smokers in the home including children and pets. By stepping outside or onto a balcony, smokers can greatly reduce the amount of toxins added to indoor air. A good quality air filter can also help.

There are currently two types of filters that are quite effective at removing indoor air pollution: electrostatic and mechanical filters. An electrostatic filter produces a static electric field to magnetically attract airborne pollutants to an oppositely charged filter. Based on the Atmospheric Dust Spot Efficiency Test, electrostatic filters are 20% to 30% effective at removing pollutants such as bacteria, dust, smoke, pet dander etc. Mechanical filters, which include a HEPA filter, are another good choice. This type captures almost 80% of all airborne pollutants according to the Atmospheric Dust Spot Efficiency Test.

Cigarette smoke also produces sticky particles that eventually form a thin tar-like film on surfaces in the home. The sticky dust is very attracted to electronic equipment; smokers often find that computer components, televisions, and stereo parts become coated. Eventually a thick film will impair function in electronics.

Smoking often causes more noticeable damage to furniture and flooring in the form of burns. The ash that falls from a cigarette is often hot enough to melt carpet fibres. Small burns can sometimes be repaired by trimming away the melted fibres. Larger burns may require a carpet patch. Burns in linoleum are more difficult to repair often requiring complete replacement. To repair a small burn on a wood floor, dip a fine steel wool pad in floor cleaner and scrub away the burnt particles.

Wipe away the cleaner and re-wax or re-stain the floor. Furniture tends to burn more easily than flooring so hot ash can do significant damage.

Unfortunately, cigarettes can and do cause more serious damage than simply a small burn in floors and furniture. Too often smokers and their families have perished because of cigarettes left unattended. If you smoke indoors, be sure to never smoke in bed or when you are tired. It takes only seconds for a burning cigarette to start a fire. Check your smoke detectors regularly and be sure to have one on every floor of your home. Some insurance companies charge their smoking clients higher premiums.

After reading all of this you may have resolved to quit smoking or encourage a loved one to give up the habit. Congratulations! This is one of the best things you can do for your health and your home. It is also one of the most challenging. Nicotine is a very addictive substance; cigarettes are also emotionally and habitually addictive. Take heart - you are not alone.

Smoking Cessation Aids

There are now more products available than ever to help you quit. It's time to take the leap into a cigarette-free life!

The "patch" resembles a band-aid and releases a slow, steady amount of nicotine onto your skin, which is then absorbed into your bloodstream. Patches are available in various strengths so you can wean yourself off of nicotine slowly. The potential downsides are the fairly high costs (almost as much as smoking) and the fact that it does not involve any of the normal physical acts of smoking, such as putting something in your mouth or reaching for something when you need nicotine. If you decide to use patches it may help to munch on carrots and celery sticks to occupy your mouth and hands. Some people even find that it helps if they light matches. It simply allows them to go through the motions and inhale the familiar scent of a burning match.

Nicotine gum is also available in different strengths and tends to be slightly cheaper than the patch. One benefit of the gum is that it provides an oral substitute for putting a cigarette in your mouth. It reportedly doesn't taste very good but perhaps that just provides added encouragement to quit!

Other, less conventional aids include hypnosis and acupuncture. Hypnosis aims to "reprogram" the mind. Instead of reaching for a cigarette people are encouraged to think of alternatives such as deep breathing, exercise or nibbling on a carrot

stick. Acupuncture has also been helpful for many people. Although the scientific methods are complicated, acupuncture works with the energy meridians of the human body. At the very least, both of these methods tend to reduce tension-a common trigger for smoking.

Understanding Yourself

Try to answer the questions below honestly and refer back to your answers as you go through the process of quitting. These questions may help you identify your motivations so that you can avoid situations that trigger the impulse to light up.

1. Why do you smoke? (Does it relieve stress, boredom, the desire to eat?)
2. Why do you want to quit other than the obvious health reasons? What is motivating you?
3. How would you rate your desire to smoke on a scale of 1-10 with 1 being least motivated?
4. What are your cues to light up? (Coffee, seeing a certain friend who smokes, etc.)
5. How do you plan to deal with the situations you answered for the previous question in order to avoid smoking?
6. What sort of rewards will you give yourself for each day, week or month that you remain smoke free?

Once you've answered these questions put them where you'll see them everyday such as on the refrigerator or bathroom wall. It will be easier to stick to your plan if you see a daily reminder.

As you work through this process, keep in mind the many benefits of being smoke-free. You, your family and pets will all be able to breathe easier and you will have removed a serious fire hazard from your home.

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