

## Improving Your Indoor Air Quality During the Winter Months

It's cold out there, and a good time to crank up the heat or put a few logs on the [fire](#). While you might enjoy being inside amidst the warmth and ambiance, [winter](#) is actually one of the worst seasons for indoor air quality.

Our chances of catching a cold are greater during the [winter](#), especially if our home's air quality is poor. In addition, trapped pollutants increase our risk of asthma and other respiratory problems. The good news is that we can do something about it! According to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) (EPA), there are 3 basic strategies for better indoor air quality: (1) controlling sources of pollutants (2) improving ventilation and (3) cleaning the air. Here's what you need to know to improve your indoor air quality this winter.

### **Source Control**

There are many sources of indoor pollution, ranging from fuel burning appliances to building materials and furnishings, and even household cleaning products. Take a look around your house to identify the sources of poor indoor air quality so you can take steps to reduce their impact.

### ***Airborne chemicals***

Also known as VOCs – volatile organic compounds – these “hang” in the air for us to breathe. Scented air fresheners, cleaning products, paint, and even carpets and furniture release chemicals in the air. VOCs can cause health problems from respiratory illnesses to headaches, dizziness, irritation in the eyes, ears, nose and throat, and more. You can choose low VOC paint, or repurposed/upcycled furniture to reduce some chemicals, and use natural cleaning products.

*Tip: A bowl of vinegar with lemon juice will draw out bad smells. Baking soda and lemon juice also absorb odors.*

### ***Carbon dioxide***

During the winter months, we're gathered together indoors, which means we're breathing in close proximity to each other. As [carbon dioxide](#) levels rise, that can cause headaches, drowsiness, and other problems. If the levels get high enough, it can even impact decision making. Limit candle lighting and fireplace use, which can contribute to carbon dioxide levels. Open a window for a few minutes, even if it's cold, to let the fresh air in.

*Tip: Add plants like red-edged dracaena, weeping figs or bamboo palm to help convert CO2 to oxygen. Source: <https://gbdmagazine.com/how-to-lower-co2-levels-in-home/>*

### ***Radon gas***

When our doors and windows are shut, it's easy for radon gas to build up. Radon gas comes from the natural decay of soil. It moves into your home through cracks or even through your water supply. While it may be natural, radon is radioactive and dangerous. It's the number one cause of lung cancer among nonsmokers. A radon test kit can measure your home's levels. The EPA offers [guidance on radon reduction systems](#).

*Tip: Most states can provide a list of qualified radon service providers. Find more information at <https://www.epa.gov/radon/epa-map-radon-zones-and-supplemental-information>.*

### **Level of humidity**

Air that is too dry – or too moist – can cause problems. The dry air in winter causes dry skin, chapped lips, dry nose, dry throat, and cracked fingertips. [High humidity](#) causes mold and condensation which also can affect our health. The ideal level for household humidity should be between 30% and 59%. You can buy an inexpensive monitor to track your household humidity. To help reduce it, use your exhaust and ventilation fans, take cooler showers, or consider a dehumidifier. UV lamps professionally installed in your HVAC system can help kill harmful bacteria and mold before they enter the air supply.

*Tip: Run your air conditioner. It may be winter, but your air conditioner can help clear humidity from your home.*

### **[Fireplaces](#)**

The scent of wood burning fireplaces may be wonderful, but that smoke is adding fine particles of dust, dirt, and liquids into the air. Choose clean-burning logs to reduce these effects, and never use wood that is wet, painted or treated. Gas fireplaces vented to the outdoors are better for air quality.

*Tip: [Warm your chimney flue](#) before starting the fire to help it draw smoke upwards and out of your home.*

### **Dust and Dirt**

Dust and dirt are respiratory irritants and [frequent cleaning](#) can help. Dust and clean your home regularly. Take cushions and rugs outside and beat them to loosen and get rid of dirt. Then wipe them clean with a damp rag to pick up any additional particles and mites. Vacuum rugs and carpets using a vacuum cleaner with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter.

*Tip: A bristle top doormat helps to trap dirt before it comes into your home. Wash or vacuum your mats regularly to prevent buildup.*

### **Pets**

We love our [pets](#) but pet hair and dander can affect indoor air quality, especially for those of us who are sensitive or allergic. Air filters and ventilation can help. (See next sections.) Brush your pet regularly to reduce the amount of shedding. Keep a towel by the door and wipe their feet to prevent them from bringing additional dirt into the house.

*Tip: Use a window squeegee on your carpet to pick up pet hair. The rubber will loosen the hair and gather it into clumps.*

### **Improved Ventilation**

Your [HVAC system](#) is your home's first line of defense against airborne particles. Make sure your system is well maintained and your ducts are cleaned. You also can upgrade the air filters in your HVAC system to a higher MERV rating, if your system allows it. This will increase their ability to remove particles, germs, viruses and chemical gases. Check with an HVAC professional.

Ventilation devices help air circulation that keeps indoor air clean. They typically are installed in a home's attic or [roof](#), and bring in fresh air on a regular basis while expelling stale air.

### **Air Cleaners**

There are many types of air cleaners for home use, ranging from table-top models to expensive systems for the whole house. An air purifier with a HEPA filter can remove anywhere between 70-95% of airborne particles. Consider buying an air cleaner for each room. Choose one with smart sensors that can detect pollutants in real time and adjust their fans accordingly.

In addition, you may consider an indoor air quality monitor. These devices can monitor levels of moisture and pollutants, and share information on which part of the house is contributing to poor air quality.

Your home is your greatest investment. Protect it as well with the [right home owner's insurance](#).

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