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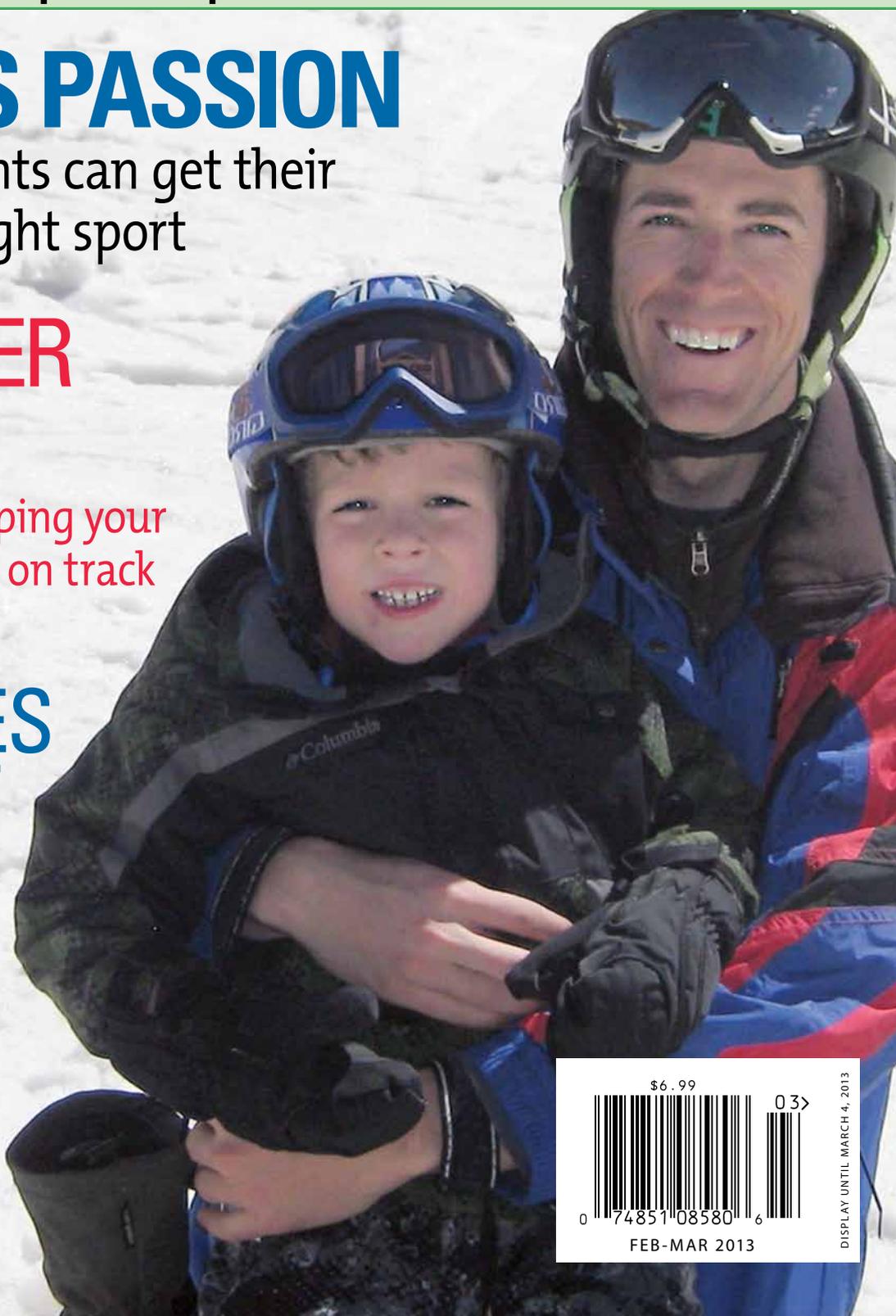
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How to rid your home of toxins



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TACKLE YOUR HOME'S TOXINS

Creating and maintaining a healing environment has huge implications for your family's well-being...

BY DEIRDRE IMUS

As parents, we devote a lot of time to protecting our children from the wide world out there, whether they're on the autism spectrum or not. From school to sports to socializing, the worrying about their well-being feels endless, and often out of our control. There remains perhaps just one realm over which we, as parents, can pre-empt to keep our kids safe and healthy: the home.

But hidden within our walls, floors, couches, and beyond lay innumerable toxins that can silently contaminate your children's vulnerable bodies, creating or exacerbating developmental delays, learning disabilities, or illnesses where none existed before. The home should be a healing environment, but unfortunately many common household items contain or emit poisonous substances—that's the bad news. The good news is that with a few simple steps, you can eliminate these pollutants from your life. If this doesn't make you feel better already, trust me—it will make your entire family feel better in the long run.

LURKING BENEATH THE SURFACE

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, indoor pollution sources that release gases or particles into the air—like furniture, paints, wood products, and carpets—are the primary cause of indoor air quality problems in the home. Some of the most egregious emitters of toxic fumes are sofas, which contain large quantities (sometimes up to two pounds!) of toxic flame retardants.

After researchers demonstrated a link between these chemicals and several serious health problems, some flame retardants were banned—but not all of them. Their influence persists in sofas, mattresses, and even in

your television screen. Leading scientists have noted that flame retardants deep inside foam cushions migrate into dust, and are eventually ingested by anyone who enters or lives in the home. Flame retardants have been linked to lower I.Q., diabetes, cancer, and fetal impairment—and tests have shown the chemicals do little to actually retard flames. They have no place in your world or in your child's, and may be causing further damage to vulnerable children on the autism spectrum.

The only surefire way to avoid exposure to flame retardants is to buy furniture made of healthy organic materials like cashmere, silk, wool, cotton, hemp, bamboo, flax and linen, which are unlikely to contain carcinogens. If you're not in the market for a new couch or mattress just yet, make

A NATURAL FLOOR PLAN

The flooring in your home—wood, carpet, tile, or something else—is another major pollutant, and while no option is perfect, some are healthier and more sustainable than others. Bamboo, cork, natural linoleum, and wood free of added formaldehyde are all better options than carpet, which can harbor dirt, dust and mold. If you insist on carpet, opt for area rugs that are made from natural fibers, and can be easily washed.

With any flooring, the U.S. Green Building Council suggests looking for sealers and cleaners that are environmentally benign and low-VOC emitting. Especially as babies, our kids spend a lot of time with their faces close to the floor, putting anything within reach into their mouths. How this may affect their tiny bodies is impossible to predict—but why take the chance?

The key is to make one change at a time, and to feel amazing about making even the smallest difference in how your kids will feel or behave, at home or in school.

sure to ventilate your home by regularly using fans, or opening windows and doors. Also, wash hands frequently so you don't transfer flame retardant residue from your hands to your mouth, and use a vacuum fitted with a HEPA filter, which is more efficient at trapping small particles.

INVISIBLE HEALTH THREATS

Unfortunately, chemical-laden furniture is not the only noxious substance percolating the air in your home, and some of the other sources may surprise you. Beyond the well-known offenders like dust and mold, a whole range of indoor air pollutants are “off-gassed” from common household items such as computers, wallpaper, and even tennis balls—basically, any manufactured product that gives off an unnatural odor. Off-gassing refers to the evaporation of synthetic compounds from a manufactured product into the air, and in your home this occurs on a near-constant basis.

These fumes can trigger allergies, asthma attacks, and skin irritation in the short-term; allergists claim that long-term implications remain unknown, but consider the known health effects of a variety of chemicals known as volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Concentrations of VOCs, which are found in paints, wood preservatives, cleaning supplies and more, are consistently up to ten times higher indoors than outdoors, according to the EPA. It has been well-established that VOCs can cause eye, nose, and throat irritation; headaches; nausea; damage to the liver, kidney, and central nervous system; and cancer—to name just a few health concerns.

Despite these known consequences, VOCs are not banned from being used in scores of products in our homes. The amount of toxins your family inhales on a daily basis is unquantifiable, and doubtless enormous. Every child's exposure to VOCs should be minimized, but this is especially true for kids on the autism spectrum, who tend to be allergy prone and ill-equipped to deal with discomfort.

The EPA recommends providing “plenty of fresh air” in the home to avoid the negative health risks of VOCs, but the real goal should be to avoid bringing these chemicals inside the home in the first place. It's no easy task, but a feasible one that offers innumerable benefits in the long run.

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS

Take it one room at a time; for instance, TheCleanBedroom.com recommends getting rid of bedding treated with chemical flame retardant or stain protection and replacing it with items made with all natural or organic fibers. They also suggest using pillows made of organic cotton, buckwheat hulls, or wool, and avoiding down comforters, which are susceptible to mold and dust mites. We spend nearly one-third of our lives in bed—make it as restorative a place as possible.

Beyond the bedroom, there are key steps you can take to reduce or eliminate your family's exposure to VOCs and

other carcinogens. Paint is one of the most toxic materials in the home, but it is also one of the easiest to replace with a healthier alternative. The U.S. Green Building Council's Green Home Guide notes that latex paints have lower VOC levels than oil-based paints, and that almost every major brand of latex paint has a low-VOC or zero-VOC product line, many of which are also low-odor. Even better are natural paints, which are made mostly of renewable, naturally occurring materials such as citrus oil, lime, clay, linseed oil, casein, and chalk. Best of all is milk-based paint, which is made from powdered casein, a milk protein. According to the Green Home Guide, it is the simplest, least toxic, and least environmentally damaging paint, containing no VOCs, lead, or formaldehyde. But regardless of which paint you select, err on the side of caution and open windows while painting, and keep them open for as long as possible.

THE HEART OF THE HOME

The kitchen is the heart of any home, nourishing our bodies with food and our souls with the company of family and friends. I've written extensively for this publication, in my “Green This” books, and elsewhere about the importance of eating an organic, plant-based diet full of leafy greens and whole grains. As the parent of any child on the autism spectrum knows, food can be friend or foe, keeping kids healthy, alert, and well-behaved—or causing them to act out, run for the toilet, and retreat into their own worlds.

As much as food is healthful or hurtful, it can also contain foreign substances that are the result of toxic growing, packing, or storing practices. Some of this is beyond our

NUKE THE MICROWAVE

Also worth it: taking care to avoid nuking your food in the microwave, no matter how pressed for time you are, no matter how easy it seems. In fact, if you can—throw the darn thing out. Aside from causing a chemical change in your food's structure and leaking small amounts of radiation into the kitchen and beyond, microwaves also zap food of its nutrients. In 2003, a study published in the *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture* showed that broccoli lost up to 97 percent of its anti-oxidants after being cooked in a microwave.

Rather than rely on this wretched device, integrative physician Dr. Joseph Mercola suggests some alternatives that you may already employ. Take food out of the freezer in advance so you won't be pressed for time and wind up defrosting a perfectly sensible meal in a poisonous microwave. Use your toaster oven at a low temperature, like 200–250 degrees, and warm a plate of food in around 30 minutes. Finally, eat as many raw, organic foods as possible—they provide a nutritious punch, and are your best bet at maintaining optimal health for the long haul.

control, but we are perfectly capable of monitoring which items enter our home, and how they are kept once inside.

By purchasing fruits and vegetables grown organically, you limit your family's exposure to pesticides and harmful chemicals like mercury (fish), and arsenic (rice). Pesticides are so ingrained in farming practices in this country that a study by the Environmental Working Group found pesticides in the cord blood of *every baby tested*. Dr. Alan Greene, a pediatrician who participated in the study, has noted that one of these groups of pesticides, called organophosphates, has been linked to lower IQ, memory problems, developmental problems, and ADHD. Dr. Green also points out that choosing organic foods can drop a child's organophosphate pesticide exposure almost overnight, as shown in a study of suburban Seattle children.

Just because you've eaten one way your entire life doesn't mean the damage is done. Changing to healthier, more whole-



Getty Images/istockphoto

◀ **TOXIN-FREE TOYS**—Look for toys made from organic cotton, hemp, wool, or unfinished solid wood to reduce your child's exposure to toxic toy components.

some foods because you know better now can and will help your family feel better, and may even improve how your kids do in school—whether autism is a factor or not.

Another major source of food contamination in the home comes from the cans or plastics in which certain foods are packed and stored. The chemical bisphenol A (BPA) has been present in plastics and metal-based food and beverage cans since the 1960s, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. It is used to make a wide range of plastic containers and is found in the resins that act as a protective lining in cans. Unfortunately, BPA does not stay put; rather, it leeches into whatever substance its container is holding (water, beans, vegetables, baby formula) and winds up inside our bodies.

Studies have linked BPA with childhood obesity, endocrine problems, diabetes, cancer, and learning disabilities. And yet, the FDA has refused to ban it from the American food supply. On the bright side, you can ban it from entering your home, and your children's bodies. Use glass containers to store leftover food, or look for plastic containers specifically labeled "BPA-free." If you must buy canned goods, look for the same label there too. It takes just a few extra minutes to make this conscious decision, but the potential long-term benefits surely seem worth it.

TOXINS AND TOYS

Few items leave their mark on a home full of children like toys. Whether trucks, dolls, art supplies, jewelry, board games, action figures or something else, toys fuel our kids' imaginations in the best possible way. Parents worry about babies choking on small parts, but it's important to also watch carefully your older sons or daughters on the autism spectrum. They are often as likely to put something in their mouth, whether out of curiosity or because of a toy's appealing, bright colors. For this reason, and also because many children's toys contain BPA, polyvinyl chloride, lead, and other toxins, stock your home with toys made from unfinished solid wood, or with organic cotton, hemp or wool. There's no need to make playtime a cause for concern.

There is seemingly no end to how you can increase your home's health quotient. It probably feels overwhelming, and that's because it is. The key is to make one change at a time, and to feel amazing about making even the smallest difference in how your kids will feel or behave, at home or in school. Let all family members know you're trying to make the home a healthier place for everybody to live, thrive, and grow, so they understand why it's important to make certain changes. It may not be easy, but revolutions rarely are. ◀

HERE'S WHAT'S IN MY MEDICINE CABINET FOR COLD/FLU SEASON:

- 1 Thieves hand sanitizer by Dr. Young living: youngliving.com
- 2 Thieves cough drops by Dr. Young living: youngliving.com
- 3 Pulsatilla homeopathic medicine: by Boiron or Hyland, for first signs of runny nose, cold.
- 4 Elderberry cough syrup by Giam: Great for the late night wake-ups when your child is coughing. (You can also make elderberry tea if you're lucky enough to grow or buy dried elderberries.)
- 5 Camu Camu Gold drops by Amazon Herb Co.: amazonherb.net (These have higher levels of vitamin C than oranges.) Add to morning smoothies before school or just add drops in water.
- 6 Thera Zinc lozenges by Quantum Health: quantumhealth.com. These dissolve in the mouth—I like the cherry with larch, marshmallow, mullein, and slippery elm.
- 7 Probiotics (Open capsules and pour in the morning smoothie): Kirkmangroup.com
- 8 Organic lollipops by Yummy Earth: yummyearth.com C'mon you gotta have these!
- 9 Roxalia homeopathic medicine by Boiron for sore throat: quick dissolving tablets.
- 10 Vitamin C Powder by Health Force Nutritionals: healthforce.com Add a teaspoon to your morning smoothie.
- 11 Triphala tablets (Ayurvedic herb) by Banyan Botanicals: Take one before bed to regulate your bowels and support metabolic function.
- 12 Kold Kare, *Andrographis paniculata* for cold & Flu, Sinusitis: karenherbs.com

FIND OUT MORE

- ▶ **Dr. Joseph Mercola**
mercola.com
- ▶ **Environmental Protection Agency**
epa.gov
- ▶ **Environmental Working Group**
ewg.org
- ▶ **Green Building Council**
new.usgbc.org