

5 Ways to Improve Your Air for a More Sustainable Home

If there were a good chance that a few basic tips could add weeks, months or years of better health to your life, would you be interested?

“I love my business and I love my clients. I want to tell them what’s most beneficial for them. When my clients make decisions about what to put in their home, they don’t always realize it, but they’re also making decisions that can affect their health,” says Kirsten Flynn.

Following are five suggestions you may never hear if you hire an interior designer. But you will learn about these things if you hire Kirsten Flynn, the principal designer at [Sustainable Home](#). She describes herself as an interior designer who has “an extra layer of knowledge in addition to the passion for design and product that all designers have.”



Here's her advice on a few ways to improve the air in your home for a safer living environment.

1. Use zero-VOC paint.

[Volatile Organic Compounds](#) (VOCs) are chemicals that disseminate from paints and other solids and liquids that contain them. Although you may not notice any immediate health effects, long-term exposure can have a negative impact on your health.

When you're buying a piece of painted wood furniture, ask about the paint or varnish. If the seller doesn't know what kind of paint was used, keep looking for other options.

“Anytime you’re making changes to your home, you should enjoy it,” says Flynn, “but it’s equally important to consider the health effects.”

When you’re painting a room, look for low-VOC paints. They’re readily available in most places that sell paint and you can get them in any color. Before you start your next paint project, look for companies that specialize in zero-VOC or environmentally friendly paint such as [Yolo](#).



2. Keep your home as formaldehyde-free as possible.

Formaldehyde is a known carcinogen. Check out the [Material Safety Data Sheet \(MSDS\)](#) to learn more about the health effects of this toxic chemical. When it’s in your indoor environment, it becomes airborne. You may not be aware of it, but it ends up in your body when you breath.

When you’re buying wood products, ask if the wood materials are formaldehyde-free. When formaldehyde is in your indoor environment, it affects your indoor air quality. It’s commonly used in glues to adhere things to floors, including wood

flooring.

It's also used in wood furniture and cabinetry. It tends to off-gas over time so if you buy older things or things made of solid wood, it helps to minimize your risk of exposure.

The next time you're looking for new cabinets, look for a company that cares about the health of their customers and doesn't use formaldehyde. You can get high end custom cabinets from great companies like [Bamboo Cabinets](#), and you can also find more affordable pieces at companies like [IKEA](#).



If you're skeptical about the dangers of formaldehyde, consider what happened to thousands of Hurricane Katrina victims who were exposed to hazardous levels of formaldehyde when they were living in temporary housing made by [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\) trailer manufacturers](#).

Many of the people who trusted [FEMA](#) to help them after they

lost their homes, went from being homeless to living in toxic temporary housing. Check out [ToxicTrailers.org](https://www.toxictrailers.org) to hear some of the stories about how formaldehyde affected these adults, children and even pets.

3. Keep flame retardants out of your home.

Before you purchase anything that has foam, such as high chairs, upholstered furniture or cushions for chairs in your kitchen, read the labels carefully or check with the manufacturer before bringing these products into your home.

Flame retardants mimic hormones. They can have a long term effects on how the body develops. They can be especially detrimental for pets, children and pregnant women, all of which are particularly sensitive and vulnerable. Children and pets tend to get even more exposure because they're more likely to breath in dust near the floor or even lick things that have been on the floor.

“Do what you can to protect yourself, but don't worry about what you can't control because that will only stress you out and make you sick anyway,” says Flynn.

[Arlene Blum](#) is a biophysicist whose research was instrumental in banning cancer-causing chemicals used as flame retardants on children's sleepwear. She advocates against Semi-Volatile Organic Compounds (SVOCs) and other chemicals harmful to humans. Check out her talk to learn more about some of the health effects of flame retardants:

4. Vacuum often.

It's best if you can get a vacuum with a HEPA filter. It can help with even ordinary allergies. It helps to minimize your exposure to pet dander and pollen and it can even help to

filter out some flame retardants.

Flynn happens to use a [Miele](#) vacuum with a HEPA filter, but there are many other good brands that can do the same job.

HARMFUL SUBSTANCES FOUND IN INDOOR AIR

eVacuumStore

MOLD SPORES
Leading cause of illness in humans
Severely underrated threat
Moderate filtration

TOBACCO SMOKE
Potentially fatal even to non-smokers
Contains chemicals, poisons, animal feces
Excellent Filtration

PET DANDER
Protein in pet saliva causes allergies and asthma attacks
Pet dander provokes allergies
Excellent Filtration

DUST MITES
Single dust ball contains as many as 250,000 house dust mites
Dust mites provoke allergies and asthma
Excellent Filtration

Pollen
Moderate

Gasoline
Excellent

Poison Gas
Moderate

Austin Air purifiers use medical grade filtration to remove 99.97% of particulates as small as 0.3 microns and 95% of all other particles

5. Use an air filter or purifier in your home.

If you already have a filter on your furnace or HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) system, check the MERV rating. The [Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value \(MERV\)](#) rating is a scale used to indicate the effectiveness of air filters.

It's best to choose a filter with a rating of 13 or higher to get the most particulates out, but you also need to be careful not to over-stress your HVAC system. A filter with a higher MERV rating can cause your HVAC system to work harder. Check

with the manufacturer to see what level filter your system can take.

[Free Fresh Air: Hurry! Offer Ends Soon](#)

If your HVAC system can't accommodate a good filter, Flynn recommends getting an air purifier from a company such as [Austin](#). If you can only have one unit, begin with your bedroom where you can purify the air you breath for about a third of your day.



You can't control everything, but you can take steps to minimize your exposure to toxins when you're at home," says Flynn.

Kirsten Flynn works mainly with residential projects in the Silicon Valley area. She enjoys creating functional and beautiful interior spaces. She also teaches and speaks about green building as it relates to interiors.

She was the first recipient of the Green Design Certificate from Canada College. She's a Certified Green Building Professional. She's also a member of the [U.S. Green Building Council](#), Coop America and the [American Society of Interior Designers](#).



In her free time, Flynn enjoys giving tours of the green buildings at [Hidden Villa](#). She is a lifelong environmentalist and artist who enjoys traveling, gardening and pulling out non-native plants in parks.



Want more advice from Flynn? Here are a few ways to connect with her:

- Follow her on [Twitter@kirfly](#).
- Ask her a question on the [U.S. Green Building Council's Green Home Guide](#).
- Check out some of her projects on [houzz](#).
- Hire her via [Sustainable Home](#) to help with your next design project.

One final tip from Flynn: anytime you're bringing consumer products into your home, check [Environmental Working Group Consumer Guides](#) to check the safety rating before you make your purchase.