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FEDERAL RESEARCH

How your home could be making your family sick

Report says 30 million houses have health issues such as mold

BY LAURA BARNHARDT CECH
Special to The Washington Post

It was a chronic thing: Almost every time Erma Taylor's great-grandson caught a cold, he also ended up having a severe asthma attack. Taylor, a retired nurse, spent many hours at a hospital, helping to hold the toddler for tests and breathing treatments, and wondering what was causing the attacks.

The one thing Taylor never suspected was that something inside the Falls Church, Va., home that she shares with her granddaughter and great-grandson was a source of the 3-year-old's medical problems.

It turned out that mold and mildew from years of shampooing the decades-old carpet were aggravating the little boy's respiratory system.

The carpeting was replaced with wood

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Homes

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flooring through a nonprofit group called Rebuilding Together, and Taylor says she has seen marked improvement.

"We haven't been back to the hospital since then," Taylor said.

Many homeowners may be unsuspecting victims of medical problems, from asthma attacks to lung cancer, caused by components and conditions in their houses, according to a new federal report.

More than 30 million homes have significant health issues, according to the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. More than 20 million housing units have a lead-based paint hazard. And more than 6.8 million homes have radon exposures above the level at which remedial action should be taken, as determined by the EPA.

The trouble is that many homeowners and renters aren't aware of the link between their housing and their health. Radon exposure, for example, produces no immediate symptoms. Carbon monoxide poisoning can initially resemble the flu. And exposure to some toxins may be confused with seasonal allergies.

"In our cars, we have oil

10 TIPS FOR A HEALTHIER AND SAFER HOME

1. Install ground-fault circuit interrupters in bathrooms.
2. Install grab bars in showers and near tubs.
3. Install railings for all stairs.
4. Make sure outdoor pathways are well lit.
5. Test carbon monoxide alarm and smoke detectors every six months.
6. Check appliances for recalls: cpsc.gov/en/Recalls. Have a professional check appliances and heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems annually.
7. Have chimney inspected for leaks annually.
8. Have an electrician's inspection to make sure codes are met annually.
9. If you see evidence of insects, rodents or other pests, consider "integrated pest management," which removes sources of food, such as crumbs on the floor and holes in trash bins, instead of just applying pesticides and poisons.
10. If you break a compact fluorescent bulb (which contain a small amount of mercury), follow directions: bitly.com/bulbbreak.

SOURCES: FEDERAL AND STATE AGENCIES

and check-engine lights," said Rebecca Morley, executive director of the National Center for Healthy Housing. "There's no such light for a house."

A federal interagency body called the Healthy Homes Work Group released a report, "Advancing Healthy Housing: A Strategy for Action," in February, with the goal of reducing the number of homes with health and safety hazards over the next five years.

But, federal officials and experts say, a reduction in illness and accidents de-

pends heavily on consumers being vigilant about the dangers in their homes.

"People spend more time looking at the kitchen countertops than they do at issues that can cause serious health problems," said Nancy Harvey Steorts, a realty agent in Virginia and author of "Your Home Safe Home."

"There are so many elements to having a home that's truly safe," said Steorts, former chairwoman of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. "Many consumers think that they don't have anything to worry about."