



Your Health at Home

What you can do!

An Environmental Health Guide
for Inuit



*Information about environmental
health issues and tips on how to
make changes in your home*



Government
of Canada Gouvernement
du Canada

Canada

*Home is
where your
health is*





Your Health at Home

Home is where the heart is—it is where we spend time with family, friends and loved ones. Because we spend so much time at home, *home is also where our health is*.

It is true that eating right and getting enough exercise and sleep are good for our health. There are, however, other easy steps you can take to ensure your home is a healthy environment for yourself and your family.



Your Health at Home is an easy-to-use guide with information about the indoor environment and how it can affect your health. It includes useful tips on how to make changes in your home and a list of resources. The topics covered in this guide are:

Indoor Air

Noise

Drinking Water

Food Safety

**Artistry/Traditional Crafts/
Hobbies**

Looking for Health Risks

Indoor Air

It is possible for the air in our houses (indoor air) to contain chemicals that can be harmful and affect our health. In the winter time we spend so much time in our houses, which are sealed up to protect us from the weather, that it is possible for our indoor air to get stale and build up with unwanted substances. These can include tobacco smoke, dust particles, mould spores and other chemicals found in carpet, plywood, paints, glue, and ceiling tile.

What are the possible health effects?

Some possible health effects from this stale indoor air can include things like:

- wheezing
- coughing
- sneezing
- sore eye, runny nose, and scratchy throat
- asthma attacks



However, there are things you can do to avoid or remove these chemicals from the air that you and your family breathe. Here are some other simple steps for maintaining good indoor air quality and minimizing these health risks.



Tips – What can you do?

One of the best and easiest ways to protect the air in your home is through adequate ventilation. This will remove stale indoor air and reduce the amount of pollution inside your home.

- Use kitchen and bathroom exhaust fans if you have them.
- Use and maintain your ventilation system according to manufacturer guidelines.
- Air out your house from time to time by briefly opening windows and doors when weather permits.

Even small actions—like taking off your shoes or boots when you come inside or changing out of work clothes when you get home—may reduce the chances of letting dirt that may contain various chemicals into your home. These habits are even more important if you work in or travel through areas where you might come into contact with products or materials that pose a health risk.

1. Tobacco Smoke

One of the biggest problems in many of our homes is tobacco smoke which can pass through cracks under and around doors, so no place in your home or car is safe from tobacco smoke. Toxic chemicals found in tobacco smoke can also stick around even after the smoker has put out the cigarette, cigar, or pipe. This is called third-hand smoke.

Why are we concerned?

Chemicals from third-hand smoke can get trapped in hair, skin, fabric, carpet, furniture, and even toys. It builds up over time and each time another cigarette is lit, more smoke gets trapped and gets into people's lungs and bodies.



Tips – What can you do?

- Make sure your home and car are as smoke free as possible.
- Protect yourself and your family from cigarette smoke exposure, and ask those who smoke to smoke outdoors well away from doors and windows of your home.
- Install a smoke-detector in your home.

2. Mould

Mould is a type of fungus that comes in a variety of colours and can grow in damp areas inside your home. Mould grows where there is too much humidity from water leaks, cooking, showering, flooding, etc. It can grow on wood, paper, fabrics, drywall, insulation, inside walls or above ceiling tiles. When mould finds a damp place to grow, it can contribute to poor indoor air quality.

Since mould needs moisture to grow, reducing moisture in the air and on surfaces in your home is the best way to reduce potential health risks from moulds.

Why are we concerned?

- When moulds are growing inside the home, there may be health concerns. Moulds release chemicals and spores. The health effects of mould can range from being insignificant to causing allergic reactions and illness.
- Pregnant women, infants, the elderly and those with health problems, such as respiratory disease or a weakened immune system, are more at risk when exposed to mould. Consult your health care provider if you believe there is someone who may be at risk.





Tips – What can you do?

- The problem starts when mould grows inside the home. Be sure to inspect your home for signs of mould.
- Sometimes moulds are hidden and cannot be seen. A musty or earthy smell often indicates the presence of moulds. But a smell may not be present for all moulds. Even when you don't notice a smell, wet spots, dampness or evidence of a water leak are indications of moisture problems and mould may follow.
- Keep the home dry.
- Find and fix water leaks.
- Instead of leaving clothes on the floor, install hooks so you can hang them to dry.
- Raise your bed off the floor to let air circulate under the mattress.



Indoor Air

- If you discover mould on hard surfaces in your home:
 - Clean up small areas of mould with soapy water and dry the surface completely. You can clean up “small areas” of mould (fewer than three patches, each smaller than a square meter) yourself. The minimum protective wear needed:
 - Safety glasses or goggles.
 - A disposable dust mask.
 - Household rubber gloves.
 - Infants and other family members with asthma, allergies or other health problems should not be in the work area or adjacent room during the cleaning.
- If your home has them, turn on fans that vent to the outdoors.
- Get help from an appropriate authority (such as your community or hamlet) when the mould covers areas larger than one square meter.



3. Dust and Dust Mites

House dust mites are found in most homes. Dust mites are so small they are not visible to the human eye. They live in beds, carpets, furniture, pillows and blankets. Reducing dust and dust mites in your home will help reduce irritants, which can cause allergic reactions and aggravate asthma and other breathing problems.

Why are we concerned?

The concern about dust mites is that some people are allergic to them. Symptoms associated with dust mite allergies include sneezing, itchy, watery eyes, nasal stuffiness, runny nose, stuffy ears, respiratory problems, eczema and (in severe cases) asthma. Many people notice these symptoms when they stir dust during cleaning activities.





Tips – What can you do?

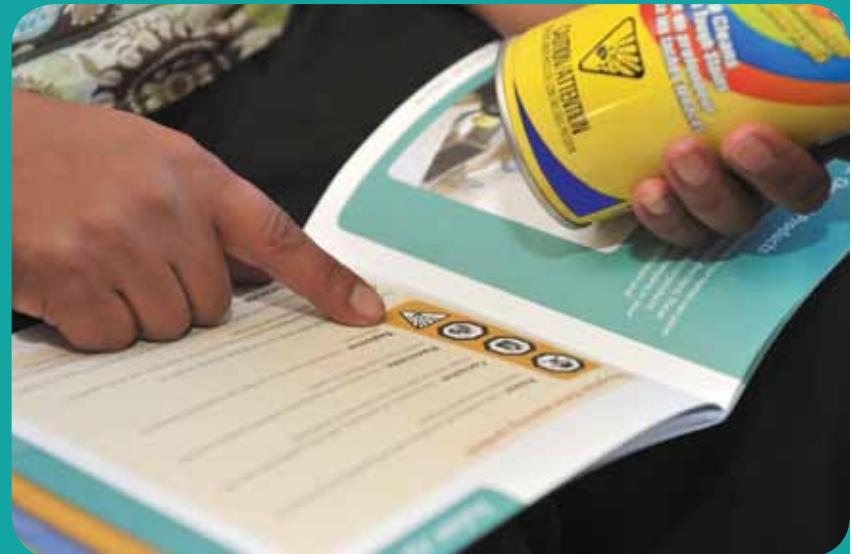
- Dust your home regularly from top to bottom. Use a damp cloth to avoid raising dust into the air.
- Reduce clutter so dust will have fewer places to settle and to make cleaning easier.
- Vacuum carpets and any fabric-covered furniture to reduce dust build-up. Vacuuming will also remove pet dander, which may cause allergic reactions in some people. Where possible, keep pets out of bedrooms and off furniture to reduce your family's exposure to pet dander.
- Vacuum mattresses to minimize dust mites. Wash sheets regularly in hot water.



4. Chemical Products

Why are we concerned?

Some of the products that we buy and use in our homes can also affect our health, if not used according to directions. These products include household cleaners, personal-care products, and pesticides approved for indoor use. Protect everyone in your home, including those with sensitivities, young children and pregnant women by following these tips.



Recognize these warning symbols



Poison – the contents of containers with this symbol are poisonous if swallowed, touched or inhaled.

Corrosive – the contents of containers with this symbol will burn skin or eyes and can also burn the stomach if swallowed.

Flammable – the contents of containers with this symbol catch fire easily if near heat, flames or sparks.

Explosive – containers with this symbol can explode if heated or punctured.

Each warning symbol also has one of these words under it.

CAUTION – means a temporary injury may occur from improper use of the product.
Death may occur after extreme exposure.

DANGER – means that the product may cause temporary or permanent injury, or death.

EXTREME DANGER – means that being exposed to even a very low quantity of the product may cause death, or temporary or permanent injury. Be very, very careful.



Tips – What can you do?

- Follow directions on the labels that tell you how to use, store and dispose of products safely.
- Always wear protective clothing (e.g. gloves, masks, eye protection) when using and handling chemical products.
- Open your windows, weather permitting, when using any product with ingredients that may pose a risk. If possible, use the product outside or in a ventilated area.
- Teach children the warning symbols for DANGER!
- Make sure chemical products are stored properly:
 - Keep all chemical products out of sight, away from food and out of reach of children (such as in a high cupboard or closet and not under the kitchen sink).
 - Store household chemicals preferably in locked cabinets and in their original containers. Do not remove or cover up the symbols and labels on containers.
 - Store fuels and oils in proper containers. Make sure that these products and any machinery containing these products are properly stored outside of your home.
 - Make sure that insect repellents are stored away from children's reach.
 - Read the label before each use. If there is anything in the label instructions that you do not understand, ask for help.

Indoor Air

- Never mix chemicals together. Some mixtures can produce harmful gases (such as bleach and toilet bowl cleaner).
- Make sure that child-resistant containers are being used.
 - Child-resistant does not mean child-proof. Close the cap on the container all the way even if you set it down for just a moment and make sure that these child-resistant caps are working properly.
- If there are people in the home who suffer from allergies, avoid the use of deodorizers, air fresheners or scented household cleaners. The chemicals in these contain irritants, which can cause allergic reactions and aggravate asthma and other breathing problems in people who are susceptible. You can use a solution of white vinegar and water as an alternative to clean your home.



Indoor Air

5. Carbon monoxide

Carbon monoxide (CO) is a harmful gas that has no colour, smell or taste. It is impossible to detect without a carbon monoxide detector. It can come from unvented kerosene and gas space heaters; gas water heaters, charcoal burners, gas stoves; exhaust from generators and other gasoline powered equipment like cars or snowmobiles; and tobacco smoke.

Why are we concerned?

Even at low levels of exposure, CO can cause breathing problems and headaches. The health effects at higher levels can be much more serious and can even cause death.





Tips – What can you do?

- Put at least one carbon monoxide detector with a sound alarm in your home. It should be certified by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA). Look for this certification on the label. It is important to place the detector close to the floor as CO is heavier than air. If you install the detector too high, it will not be able to detect the proper levels of CO in your home. Follow instructions for where the detector should be placed .This type of alarm will alert you early if there is too much CO in your home.
- Maintain appliances such as furnaces, gas stoves and water heaters so they work properly. Have them inspected by a professional at least once a year.
- Never use barbecues or outdoor/camping stoves indoors. Do not use a kerosene or oil lamp, or a space heater, in an enclosed space unless the label clearly says they are made specifically for indoor use.
- Do not start cars, trucks, snowmobiles or other vehicles or let them idle near open doors or windows.
- Never run gas powered machinery in unventilated areas.



Noise

To most of us, loud noises signify sounds that we do not want to hear.

What are the possible health effects?

Most people find too much noise very annoying. Over time, high levels of noise can affect your quality of life, can be harmful to your health, and may lead to hearing loss. As homes and communities become more crowded, environmental noise levels increase.

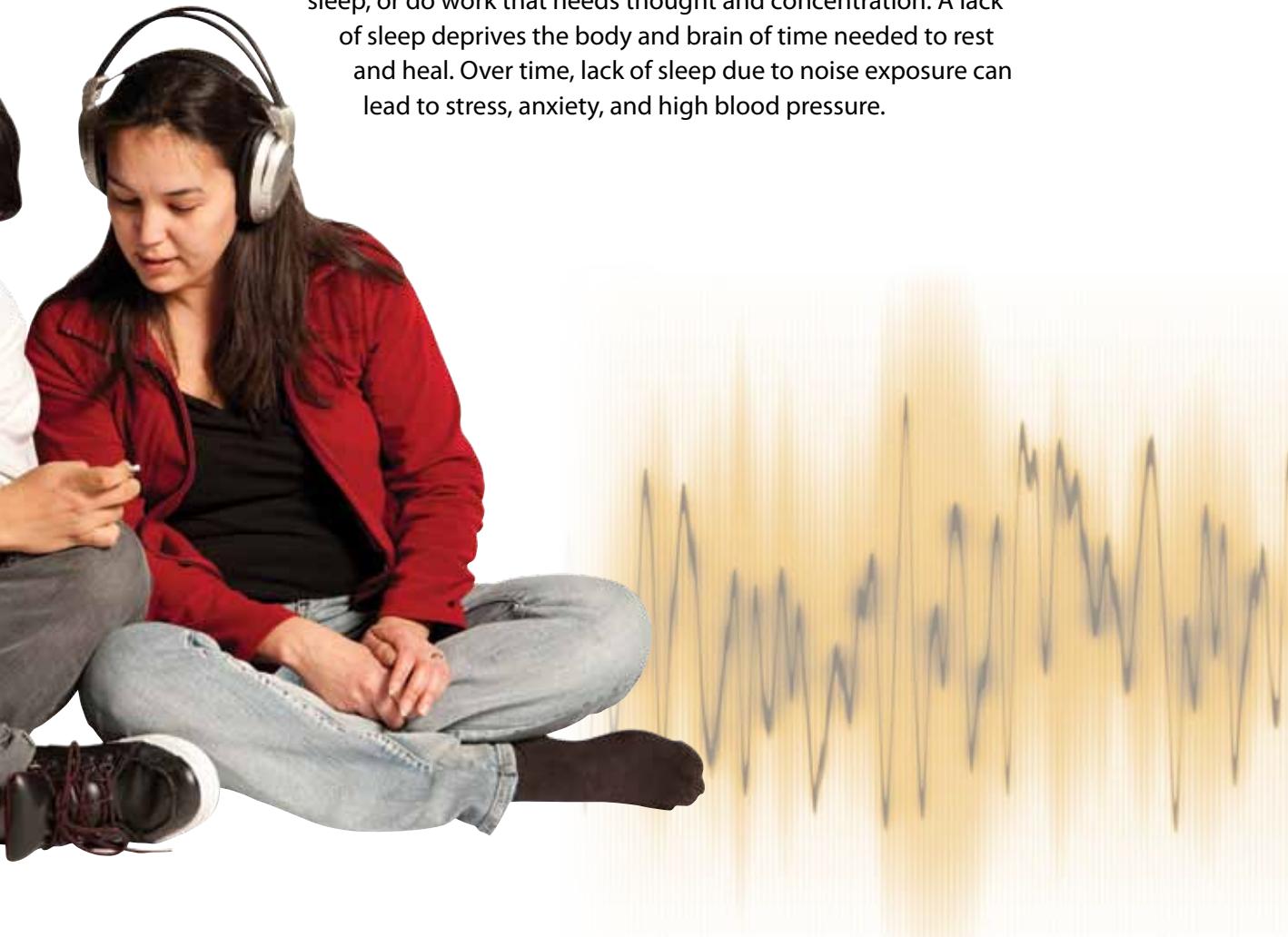
It is important to note that if you use firearms for hunting or target practice regularly, you are at increased risk for permanent hearing loss, whether immediate or gradual. The impact of the noise on your hearing can be reduced by wearing ear plugs.

Children may have a stress response to loud noise which in turn might have a negative effect on children's learning and language development. It may also disturb motivation and concentration, and may result in reduced memory and ability to carry out tasks.

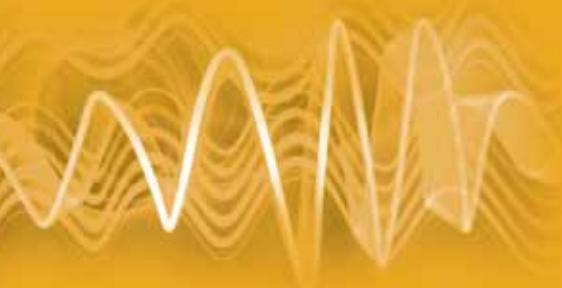


Noise

Consequences of exposure to loud noise include temporary or permanent hearing loss and ringing or buzzing in the ears (tinnitus). Noise may also affect your ability to have a normal conversation, enjoy leisure activities, get a good night's sleep, or do work that needs thought and concentration. A lack of sleep deprives the body and brain of time needed to rest and heal. Over time, lack of sleep due to noise exposure can lead to stress, anxiety, and high blood pressure.



Noise



Common sources of high levels of noise that may pose a risk to health include:

- Personal music players used with headphones or ear buds.
- Badly maintained snowmobiles or four wheelers.
- Gunfire, both over the short and long-term.
- Toys, especially noisy toys that may be held too close to a child's ear or that a child may use in ways that are not according to the manufacturer's "recommended use" instructions.





Tips – What can you do?

- Limit the amount of time you spend on noisy leisure activities, or wear protective gear (such as ear plugs).
- Use hearing protection gear such as ear plugs while hunting.
- Talk to your children about keeping the volume of their personal music players, at enjoyable, but safe levels. If someone a metre away must shout to be understood, the sound level of the music is probably higher than 85 decibels and may be hazardous.
- Give your ears time to recover if you have been exposed to loud noise and experienced temporary hearing loss or ringing or buzzing in your ears.
- Buy toys that do not have loud sound effects.



Drinking Water

Typically in the North, surface water is naturally clean and safe to drink. However, lake water or melted ice water (surface water) can become contaminated. Even the water from your water tank can become contaminated if it is not maintained adequately.

What are the possible health effects?

Health effects that come from drinking contaminated water include:

- Gastro-intestinal infections
- Nausea and vomiting



Tips – What can you do?

- The owner of the house should ensure that water tanks are cleaned and disinfected when the tank is first installed and once a year thereafter. You should never try to enter the water tank. Water tanks are dangerous because they are confined spaces and may not contain or allow in enough air to breathe. To clean the tank:
 1. Ensure the tank is full of water
 2. Add 1 cup (250 mL) of unscented household bleach for every 50 imperial gallons of water in your water holding tank. If possible mix the bleach and water in the tank.
 3. To disinfect the plumbing lines and fixtures, turn the taps on. Once you smell the chlorine odour at each outlet, close the taps.
 4. Leave for 12 hours (usually overnight) and do not use the water during this time.
 5. Completely drain the water tank. Do not drain this water into a septic tank if you have one.
 6. Refill with drinking water.
- The taste and smell of bleach may be too strong after you refill your tank. If this is the case, empty and refill your tank again. This will help rinse the bleach from your tank.

Drinking Water

- Use only **cold** tap water for drinking, cooking and making baby formula, since hot water may contain more lead or other contaminants (hot water will more easily dissolve contaminants and hot water often can sit for long periods of time in your hot water tank and pipes).
- During boil-water advisories or boil-water orders, or if you plan on drinking water from the land or ice, you should bring your water to a rolling boil for a full minute before use. Do this for all water you use for drinking, cooking, making beverages and ice cubes, washing fruits and vegetables, or brushing your teeth. Give toddlers and infants sponge baths to ensure they do not drink the water while being bathed.
- If you plan on drinking water from the land or ice, follow common safety practices such as:
 - Choose a clean area to collect ice for drinking water, away from snowmobile exhaust or other sources of pollution;
 - Shave off the outer layer of ice and collect the fresh inner core;
 - Bring your water to a rolling boil for a full minute before use;
 - Store the water in clean containers; and
 - Cover the water to avoid incoming debris.



Drinking Water

A photograph showing a woman from the side, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, standing at a kitchen sink. She is holding a red apple under running water and rinsing it. Another person's hands are visible on the left, also holding an apple. The background shows a kitchen counter with various items.

Food Safety

What are the possible health effects?

Foodborne illness occurs when a person gets sick from eating food that has been contaminated with an unwanted micro-organism, such as a bacteria, virus or parasite. This type of illness is also known as food poisoning.

The most common symptoms of foodborne illness include stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and fever. Many cases of foodborne illness are not reported because the signs often resemble the stomach flu.

While most people fully recover from foodborne illnesses, they can result in chronic health problems in some cases.

Although food handling practices that minimize the number of bacteria in food must be employed at all stages of commercial processing, we all have an important role to play in practicing safe food handling techniques in the home.



Tips – What can you do?

Food Handling

Clean

- Always wash your hands and cooking surfaces with soap and hot water before you handle food. Do this often while you prepare the food, and again when you have finished. Sanitize countertops, cutting boards and utensils with a freshly made mild bleach solution (15-20 ml or 3 to 4 teaspoons of bleach in 1 L or 4 cups of water).
- Make sure you try to wash dishes right away after each meal.
- Wash all fresh fruits and vegetables under cool running water before you eat or cook them.
- Clean country food (fish, caribou, deer, seal, etc.) outside when it is possible to do so. This will help prevent disease-causing micro-organisms that may be on the animal's skin or fur from being brought into your home. When cleaning country food indoors, clean and disinfect the counters, cutting boards, ulus and knives completely when you are finished. Make sure to throw away all cardboard and plastic used while cleaning meat when finished. Turn on a fan or open a window, weather permitting, to get good air flow, if needed.

Separate

- Keep foods like meats and their blood and juices away from other foods during storage and preparation.
- Have separate cutting boards for raw meats and for vegetables.

Cook

- Cooking times vary for meats and fish. After they are cooked, keep meats and fish out of the "danger zone" - between 4°C to 60°C (or 40°F to 140°F) by preparing them quickly and serving them right away. Do not let food sit in the danger zone because bacteria can rapidly grow.

Store

- Refrigerate or freeze foods that can spoil, as well as cooked food and leftovers within two hours. Make sure the refrigerator is set at a temperature of 4°C (40°F) or colder, and keep the freezer set at -18°C (0°F).
- Store food in containers with lids.
- Avoid storing food in plastic grocery bags, garbage bags or other containers not meant for food storage.



Artistry/Traditional Crafts/ Hobbies

What are the possible health effects?

Arts, traditional crafts and hobbies can be good for your health since they stimulate both body and mind. Practicing these crafts can boost creativity, self esteem, passion, pleasure and accomplishments. On the other hand, some crafts can have some negative health effects.





Artistry/Traditional Crafts/Hobbies

Tips – What can you do?

- Sand and/or carve wood, antler, bone and/or soapstone outside when possible. If you must do it inside, wear a good quality breathing mask and make sure the area is well ventilated and separated from other areas to keep dust contained.
- Tan hides outdoors or outside the home.
- When using paints, glue or any other type of chemical product, make sure you do it in a well-ventilated room or outdoors when possible.
- Use a damp cloth or mop to pick up dust from sewing, knitting, etc.





Looking for Health Risks

As part of healthy everyday habits, it is a good idea to take a close look at your home to search for any hidden health risks.

Doing a home-health inventory is easy. Here are a few simple things you can do yourself in just a few hours. This can help you transform your home into a healthier and safer place.

If you suspect it, check it!

If you think something is not right, check it out. Once you know, you will be better able to decide how to manage the risks, and protect both your health and your family's health.



What you can do

Indoor Air

- Make your home and car as smoke-free as possible.
- Check for mould that can be seen, especially in damp areas like the bathroom.
- Clean up small areas of mould and get help with large areas.
- Remove unneeded materials (such as paint, kerosene, etc.) that are stored inside.
- Fix leaks and clean up after leaks and floods.
- Turn on fans that vent outside or open windows, weather permitting, when showering or boiling water on the stove.
- Vent clothes dryer to the outside.
- Dust and vacuum regularly.
- Safely dispose of all old, unused chemical products, paints, pesticides, etc.
- Keep chemical products out of sight and reach of children.
- Install a Canadian Standards Association (CSA) approved carbon monoxide detector and smoke-detector on each level of your home.

Noise

- Limit the amount of time spent on noisy leisure activities, including listening to loud music.
- Wear ear protection if exposed to loud noises.

Drinking Water

- Use only cold tap water for drinking, cooking and making baby formula.

- Clean out water tanks once per year.
- Follow local water advisories.

Food Safety

- Wash hands, cooking surfaces, dishes and utensils before and after you handle food.

- Refrigerate or freeze foods that can spoil, as well as cooked food within two hours.

Artistry/Traditional Crafts/Hobbies

- Open windows when using paint, varnish, adhesive (glue).

- Sand and carve wood, antler, bone, soapstone outside when possible, and/or use a good quality breathing mask.

Resources

Visit these websites for further information on a number of the potential health risks described in this guide:

- Health Canada's **Mould & Your Health** – Booklet and video on mould, including health effects, prevention and clean up: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/mould
- Health Canada's **It's Your Health** – publications on a wide range of health and safety issues: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/index-eng.php
- Health Canada's **Consumer Product Safety** – Advisories, Warnings, and Recalls: www.health.gc.ca/consumer
- Canadian Partnership for Consumer Food Safety Education – **Be Food Safe**: www.befoodsafe.ca (Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada, Canada Food Inspection Agency and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada are partners)
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) – **Maintaining a home**: www.cmhc.ca/en/co/maho
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) – **Indoor Air Quality Program**: www.iaq-qai.com

To learn more about environmental health issues and tips on how to make changes in your home, visit your **local health centre** or go to **www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/environment**

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