

Keeping Homes Warm And Dry

People often underestimate the seriousness of damp conditions in the home. Evidence suggests that dampness is a strong causative factor in health problems such as chronic coughs, wheezing and asthma. Any mould that can result from the presence may be really bad for us, particularly if we have asthma. Indoor mould is associated with upper respiratory symptoms. This means blocked noses, sore throats and recurrent upper respiratory tract infections such as colds and flu.

Many of our homes are damper than we realise. If a house doesn't get much sun, isn't ventilated or has an unflued gas heater, then it is likely to be damp. The easiest way to tell if a house is damp is to follow your nose – the house will smell musty.

The cost of having a damp house has more than one aspect. Damp houses are also more difficult to keep warm, and dry houses easier to heat. It is worth noting that the World Health Organisation recommends a minimum indoor temperature of about 18 degrees Celsius. Anything lower than 16 degrees significantly increases the risk of respiratory disease.

Check your sources

It is advised that you start from the top, or more accurately the outer, and think 'prevention'. It is worthwhile considering all potential sources of damp, both inside and outside the building. Make sure that there are no faults with guttering or roofing that may let water into the house, or a dripping tap that may contribute to the soaking of the ground underneath your house, in turn leading to your house becoming damp. Avoid using an unflued gas heater as these release water and particles into the air. Many people with asthma are especially sensitive to these particles. The air becomes moist, and dust mites which are one of the principal triggers of asthma, thrive in high humidity. Therefore it is extremely important for everyone that the air inside the house is dry. If you use a clothes drier, make sure that it is vented to the outside. Dry your clothes outside rather than indoors if possible. It is better for your inside environment and dust mites do not like sunlight.

Wrap up your house!

Insulation to make a house easier to warm is a good idea, and a healthy form of heating such as a flued gas heater, a heat pump or a pellet burner will help you keep your house warm and reduce health risks. Polythene that covers the ground under your home can also help to keep your home warm and dry.

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation's Sensitive Choice programme promotes products which are good for people

with asthma and allergies. Many of these products are targeted at the home. For more information visit: www.asthmafoundation.org.nz/sensitivechoice

New Zealand has the second highest rate of asthma in the world. So, in terms of public health and for our own sakes, it is important that we maintain dry and healthy homes. It is also very important to keep your home smoke free as well. Cigarettes are a major trigger of asthma. Keeping our homes (and cars) smoke free is vital in modelling healthy behaviour for our children and other young people. The only thing you should light up around children is their faces – with smiles, when and where possible. As they emulate the behaviour of adults so much, it is good not to smoke so that the air is not filled with arsenic and the myriad of other chemicals contained by cigarettes. If you choose to smoke, ensure that you do it outside at all times, and not just when the children are around.

Keeping things dry

The extraction of moist air from your kitchen, bathroom and laundry is important. Adequate ventilation is also necessary to deal with moisture that is constantly being generated in our homes by many common daily activities. You can open windows to ventilate your house but this is not recommended at night or when it is cold as it will compromise the heating of your home.

If you can afford it, a home ventilation system, particularly one fitted with a heater to warm the air when it is very cold, is a good way of ensuring adequate ventilation in any weather. The systems are designed to remove the wetter contaminated air within the home and constantly replace it with fresh drier air at a controlled rate. Unheated ventilation systems and those that turn off when the weather is cold should be avoided as their usefulness and overall performance is considerably less.

A good place to learn more about warming your home this autumn and winter, reducing your carbon footprint and saving yourself money at the same time, is at www.energywise.govt.nz, which is an initiative of EECA, the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority.

