

ENVIRONMENTAL HOME

Make home safe for the holidays

By Dan Howard

FOR TRIB TOTAL MEDIA

One of the many great things about this time of year is visiting with the friends and family. With families scattered across the country and not able to make the trip home for weekly Sunday dinners, holiday visits are more important than ever.

Picture the family with asthmatic children, parents with respiratory or heart disease or the senior citizen that has pneumonia four times in a year. These are some of the health issues that can be caused by environmental issues in the home.

The holidays may be a time to consider gifts that improve health and safety. Caring relatives or friends can arrange for the needed professional assessment, testing and any needed repairs. This is a great way to show how much you care about the important people in your life.

Mold odors throughout the home

Moldy homes are not healthy for anybody, especially residents with the problems brought on by age, diminished immune systems, respiratory or cardiac disease and many other illnesses. There are professionals who can test for mold and determine the conditions that are conducive to the growth of mold. The goal is to change the underlying causes that allowed the growth of mold and change those conditions before correcting the mold contamination.

Odors when a furnace starts

With the exception of the first five minutes of a new

heating season, it is a very bad sign when a furnace has an odor when it starts up. Possible causes range from a damaged heat exchanger or blocked chimney to natural gas leaks or a dead animal trapped in the ductwork. An odor could also be dirt and allergens in the ductwork.

Changing of furnace filters or cleaning ductwork can help with the allergen levels.

This is important for those with respiratory disease. It is important to also check ductwork going through attics, basements and crawl spaces to see if a loose duct connection is pulling mold, allergens and other odors from those areas into the living space.

A more complicated set of issues can be created by a blockage or restriction in either the supply or return ductwork. This can create pressure differentials that pull mold and other chemicals from inside of house walls into the living space. This is a tad more complicated than most technicians handle, but there are specialists who can check pressure balancing in buildings.

There will be many tragic news stories over the holidays that have their start with a furnace that was de-

fective or not working at all. People freezing or ill from a malfunctioning furnace is one set of problems.

Carbon monoxide poisoning or fires can be another outcome.

Too many people do not realize they have a dangerous furnace because they accept the fact that they have been feeling sick since the beginning of heating. Illness is expected in winter, and they do not think about their furnace as a possible source of their illness.

Having a furnace serviced and the needed repairs completed for someone in need can be a very loving gift. A service call where the furnace operation and vent system are checked and adjusted usually costs between \$75 and \$150. It is a great idea to make sure that the gas lines or oil lines and tanks are checked at the same time.

As a side note, taking the time to help someone apply for LIHEAP fuel assistance could be a gift of an hour's time that make winter bearable for someone in need. This can be done online at <http://www.dhs.pa.gov>

Other sources of carbon monoxide and combustion toxin exposure

Gas and other fossil fuel

appliances can create carbon monoxide poisoning. Ventless fireplaces and heaters, clothes dryers, ovens and ranges are all sources of carbon monoxide that are often ignored.

Carbon monoxide detectors are as important as smoke detectors.

Purchase carbon monoxide detectors that have both a digital readout and a loud alarm.

The "sound only" CO detectors have a delay that allows levels in some models as high 400 PPM (parts per million) without making a peep.

The threshold level that is considered unsafe is 10 PPM. The digital readout allows earlier warnings and is well worth the difference in cost.

Make sure the detectors are installed near gas appliances or warm air furnace vents and where the residents can see the reading.

Solving the mystery of the smelly hot water

The smelly hot water tank can be an environmental issue. Anaerobic bacteria and

Legionella can live in this water.

These contaminants can be a health hazard when inhaled during showers or when standing over spigots with screens in the spout.

The anaerobic bacteria can be one of many different types with the potential to create health problems.

The rotten egg odor is hydrogen sulfide created by the breakdown of the part in the tank called the sacrificial anode.

The role of this part is to protect the life of the hot water tank.

The factory usually makes these of aluminum or magnesium. One solution is to replace the standard anode with an anode made of a combination of zinc and aluminum.

Legionella is more common in our homes than most people realize.

A low temperature in the hot water tank can allow the Legionella bacteria to grow.

Persons with compromised immune systems contract pneumonia from the Legionella, but the cause

of the pneumonia is often not diagnosed, the illness is simply treated with antibiotics.

Continued exposure can result in repetitive pneumonia episodes.

The holiday season is the time of year we give the very best.

Taking the time to notice what someone you love really needs to have a healthy home is about as good as the joy of gift giving gets.

A significant portion of Sick Building Syndrome testing and repairs is arranged for by caring friends and family members rather than the people actually living in those homes.

You will find links and information about those improved systems in the online copy of this article at: www.EnviroSpect.info/HolidaySafetyGifts.

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