

clean sweep



**THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO DECLUTTERING,
DETOXING, AND DESTRESSING YOUR HOME**

ALISON HAYNES

DEDICATION

*For Michael, my father. Thanks for helping me
in so many practical ways over the decades.*

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Clean Sweep

The Ultimate Guide to Decluttering, Detoxing, and Destressing Your Home

Alison Haynes



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managing your house

Housekeeping is about so much more than cleaning a house. Until the fifteenth century, cleaning was a peripheral activity to the central tasks of preparing food, gathering and chopping wood and other fuel, keeping the house warm, and getting water. Laundry is not much of a problem when you don't have a change of clothes. When the animals that are your livelihood need feeding, who's going to worry about dust on the mantel?



What is the clever house?

Now that we live in a time of excesses, we have new considerations. Our precious belongings—laptops, loofahs, or lingerie—need caring for. These days we think more about the environmental impact of our actions—whether it's flushing cleaning-product residue down the drain or the amount of clean water and fossil fuels we use in heating water to wash our clothes. We are increasingly aware that just because a chemical removes stains effortlessly or a paint lasts year after year, it does not guarantee that it's nontoxic and safe near children, or even safe to use regularly.

Added to that, we want our houses to be havens. Somewhere we can escape to, away from the daily grind of weekly grocery shopping, office politics, and playground banter. Our houses are more than roofs over our heads—they are also our homes.

Clever housekeeping incorporates a number of interrelated ideas: that a house should be healthy, that living in it and maintaining it should not take an undue toll on the environment, and that it should be comfortable and safe to live in, not unnecessarily expensive to maintain, and efficient to run on a day-to-day basis.

The cleverest of clever houses incorporates all of these aspects. In fact, it is hard to do otherwise. For instance, when you choose to clean your bathroom with safe and gentle baking soda instead of a store-bought cleaner, you are not only making a green choice that could save money and has less impact on the environment, you are also creating a healthier and safer home environment for you and your family. When you plant a deciduous tree that will shade your house in summer and allow light and warmth in winter, you are making a green choice that could ultimately represent a savings on your power bill (a savings for both you and the environment), increase the comfort of your home, and contribute to a healthier atmosphere. Clever, indeed!

So let's take a closer look at all the aspects of a clever house.

Healthy house

A healthy house benefits from sufficient fresh air entering, with enough ventilation to ensure indoor air pollutants are regularly removed. Good ventilation also ensures a house is not too humid, which in turn helps keep it free from excessive mold and bacterial growth.

A healthy house is supportive and considerate of allergy sufferers. Simple measures can help—letting beds air, opening windows for ventilation, keeping sinks clean, and keeping a check on mold growth around plugs and faucets. Knowing how to effectively clean and, where necessary, disinfect around the house keeps bacterial populations below disease levels. It also encompasses knowledge of the cleaning products we use that may irritate or even poison in the wrong doses and in the wrong hands. The more we know about the chemicals that we encounter every day, the more we can make informed choices about their use.

A healthy house accommodates the various needs of all members of the family—even the family pet—and still remains healthy.

Increasingly, too, the notion of a healthy house covers choices in furniture, carpets, curtains, and decorating options—we don't put lead in paint anymore, but are there other substances in some paints we might wish to avoid if we knew more?

Green house

An environmentally friendly house is an energy-efficient and comfortable one—warm in winter, cool

in summer, light enough in key rooms, and pleasant to be in because it is well ventilated and smells fresh. The green house takes less of a toll on the environment—and also on the pocket. Ideally, it is sited and landscaped to take maximum advantage of the sun's light and warmth in all the seasons of the year. It relies less on nonrenewable energy sources (such as coal) by making the best use of low-impact, renewable energy sources (such as sun and wind). The green house is a low-polluting one, not only in terms of the energy sources it uses, but also in the products that are used within its walls. Because it is also a healthy house, the green householder chooses organic cleaning products with preference to harsh and polluting chemicals. Water is conserved and reused when possible.

Recycling is a vital component of the green philosophy. From water and organic waste to recyclable building materials and packaging, the green house minimizes the production of garbage and landfill. The options available to householders for reducing the impact of their homes on the environment are growing daily and range from actions as simple as choosing reusable cloth bags over plastic at the supermarket to solar water heaters, signing on to green power sources, and even selling solar-produced electricity back to the local grid.



Efficient and safe house

When you run an efficient house, the money you save can go to other expenses such as vacations, music lessons or in a bigger house. It can ensure that you are able to make ends meet. There are numerous ways to save money here and there—from choosing energy-efficient appliances and fixing a leaking tap to growing a few vegetables (even a pot of herbs on a windowsill) or shopping in bulk.

But being efficient does not just mean being energy efficient. The efficient house ideally has a place for everything and (on a good day) everything in its place. Clutter is reduced to a minimum. In an efficient house, there is a list of emergency numbers near the phone, you can always find your umbrella, and that bill that needs to be paid today is right at hand—not buried somewhere in the middle of a mountain of papers on the dining room table!

A safe house is not only a healthy one, it also provides a physically safe environment where inhabitants of all ages can feel secure. Safety measures are often a matter of common sense and very little financial outlay. The safe house has fire alarms, circuit breakers, child-proof safety devices for toddlers, security rails in the bathroom for the elderly or infirm, outdoor lighting, a readily accessible first-aid kit, and a lockable storage space for medicines and other potentially dangerous substances.

How clever is your house?

The following chapters of this book will give you all the information you need to choose your individual path to creating your own clever house. If you feel the urge to change the way you run your home, you're more likely to be successful if you adapt it, and your lifestyle, gradually. You could start with using fewer toxic cleaning materials and decorating products, and consider the more expensive items, such as furniture or flooring, energy-efficient large appliances or solar water panels, as they need replacing. If you feel overwhelmed by clutter, tackle one room—or even one cupboard or one shelf—at a time. And remember, even the smallest changes can make a big difference. You'll be running a clever house before you know it.

the clever house

Let's explore the various aspects of the clever house in more detail. Once you are familiar with the basic concepts, you can apply them to every room in the house and even to the garden.





WE ARE BORN AT HOME, *live at home, and we must die at home, so that the comfort and economy of home are of more deep, heartfelt and personal interest to us, than the public affairs of all the nations of the world.*

Motto of *The Magazine of Domestic Economy* (1835)

Healthy house

Making your house healthy involves thinking about something as basic as the air you breathe—is it as clean as you think? It's about taking measures to make that air as clean as possible—from reducing pollutants to ensuring that your home is adequately ventilated and free of dampness. And it's about making sure that your home environment is comfortably clean and fresh, especially for allergy sufferers.

The air we breathe

Sources of pollution outside the house are immediately apparent. Emissions from cars and factories, for example, are often visible and may even smell. We like to think, in contrast, that our homes are havens of pure, clean air. But our homes have changed. Double glazing is more common and draft windows and doors less common. We seal up the house for energy efficiency by draft-proofing and insulation. Central heating has largely replaced open fires, which create a draft of their own, continually drawing new fresh air into the home.

Since those of us in industrialized countries spend somewhere between 75 and 90 percent of our time indoors, we increasingly rely on the quality of indoor air. In many houses it is not being mixed regularly with air from outdoors, fresh or otherwise. In addition, new materials for furnishing and decoration are not always the inert substances we believe they are. Many substances send gaseous molecules into the air in a process called "outgassing." Although some of these are associated only with the installation of, say, a carpet, others—such as the glues in particle board furniture or urea formaldehyde foam—continue to emit gases for years.

Paralleling this change in the chemical environment of our homes is a rise in a range of diseases and conditions such as allergies, multiple chemical sensitivity, and chronic fatigue syndrome.

Whether or not you are affected by particular chemicals you are exposed to in your home or work life, such as pesticides or formaldehyde, depends on a number of factors, including your immune system (which may be compromised by lack of sleep, infection, or stress) and the degree of exposure. People can become used to their body's response to chemicals, but only for so long.

The numerous potential sources of indoor air pollution include cigarette smoke, combustion byproducts, biological pollutants, volatile organic compounds, and a number of other chemical pollutants, such as heavy metals and asbestos.

SICK BUILDINGS

In the 1970s, the term “sick building” was coined to describe the situation where a group of people occupying a building reported a range of symptoms associated with being in the building. Typical complaints include lethargy and fatigue, headaches, dizziness, nausea, irritation of mucous membranes, sensitivity to odors, eye and nasal irritation, rhinitis (runny nose), nasal congestion, and feelings of general malaise. Theories as to the causes include air contamination, poor design, inadequate maintenance, and faulty ventilation. Low levels of pollutants may act together; humidity may be a factor. In 1984, the World Health Organization reported that as many as 30 percent of new and remodeled buildings worldwide “may have generated excessive complaints related to indoor air quality.”

Tobacco smoke is unhealthy for all

Cigarette smoke is a complex mixture of more than 4,000 chemicals, some in gas form and others solid particles. Smoke at home can cause rhinitis, pharyngitis (inflammation of the throat), congested nose, persistent cough, headaches, wheezing and irritation of the conjunctiva (the membrane that covers the white of the eye and lines the eyelids). In addition, it can worsen respiratory conditions. Children—even more so, babies—are particularly vulnerable to problems from tobacco smoke. The smoke can trigger the onset of asthma and make an existing asthma condition more severe and more difficult to control. Long-term exposure to tobacco smoke is linked with breathing and lung disease, as well as exacerbated respiratory and cardiovascular disease and changes in the body's immune system.

FRESH AIR Place a few slices of lemon in a shallow dish of water to rid a room of the smell of cigarette smoke.

Increased ventilation helps but it does not eliminate the health risks associated with tobacco smoke. Family members may be less exposed if you insist that smokers go outside to smoke. Some high efficiency air cleaners can remove some of the particles in tobacco smoke, but most cannot remove the gaseous pollutants.

Combustion by-products

When we burn fuel to produce heat or light, the combustion of that fuel also produces by-products such as carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, soot, formaldehyde, and hydrocarbons such as butane, propane, and benzene.

BURNING ISSUES

You might think only of a smoky fire, but all heating devices produce combustion by-products to some degree—even a state-of-the-art gas cooker. Most modern heating devices have built-in safety mechanisms, but ancient or faulty devices or those used inappropriately can poison the air.

- **Wood stoves and open fires** Both wood and coal smoke contain numerous pollutants, including carbon monoxide. Most of these by-products should go up the chimney, but in the case of inefficient and poorly designed flues, some may enter the room. Wood smoke also contains carcinogens, while coal smoke contains sulfur dioxide—once responsible for city smog. Open fireplaces are romantic, but wasteful of energy and polluting. Sealed units, such as sealed combustion stoves, are more efficient, safer, and also environmentally cleaner, especially if you burn matured, dry wood.
- **Gas appliances** These appliances for cooking, hot water, and central heating produce carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, nitric oxide, nitrogen dioxide, small amounts of formaldehyde, and sulfur dioxide. Old models with pilot lights or faulty burners produce more toxins than newer, well maintained ones.
- **Kerosene (paraffin) heaters** These heaters release numerous noxious gases and much moisture and are not recommended for long-term use. It is essential to keep a window open or ensure other ventilation while they burn.
- **Miscellaneous burners** Even oil lamps, incense burners, candles, and aromatherapy lamps produce combustion by-products.

Some of these by-products, such as carbon monoxide, are particularly poisonous to the elderly, fetuses, and people with cardiovascular or lung disease, and are fatal in high concentrations. Carbon monoxide poisoning sometimes mimics flu.

WHAT COLOR IS YOUR FLAME? The flame on a gas burner—for instance, the stove or water heater—should burn blue. If it's orange, it may be faulty and need servicing.

Other gaseous pollutants can cause a variety of symptoms, including dizziness, headaches, nausea, fatigue, a fast heartbeat, wheezing, persistent cough, and eye and upper respiratory tract irritation. Burning fuels may also trigger an asthma attack in some people.

Biological pollutants

When scientists talk about biological air pollution, they mean viruses and bacteria passed around by animal and human occupants of homes; insect and animal visitors—usually of the unwelcome variety—that shed allergens; and fungi and bacteria, which grow in water reservoirs and on surfaces.

Although a number of factors determine the level of biological agents that are released into the air, humidity is one of the most significant. High humidity encourages the proliferation of house dust mites and many forms of fungi. It is a particular problem after flooding or in a continually damp carpet, and in poorly ventilated bathrooms and kitchens. In addition, several household appliances produce moisture and are therefore ideal conditions for bacteria and fungi. The appliance culprits are humidifiers, dehumidifiers, air-conditioners, and drip pans under the cooling coils of refrigerators.

Microbes may also linger in some heating, ventilating, and air-conditioning systems—sometimes for very obvious reasons, such as air intake pipes situated near spots contaminated by bird and animal droppings; at other times because of humidification systems or cooling coils.

HOT STUFF: IS YOUR HEATER SAFE?

Faulty or incorrectly installed or maintained heaters can produce elevated levels of pollutants. Check that your heater is running efficiently and safely.

- Make sure that vented appliances are properly installed with external vents.
- Investigate any odors produced when a heater is in use.
- Have all heating devices such as water heaters, clothes dryers, and furnaces regularly serviced by a professional.
- Clean fireplaces and stoves for wood and coal seasonally.
- Old heaters may lack safety devices such as cutoff mechanisms, which shut the heater off if poisonous carbon monoxide reaches a dangerous level. Consider investing in a new one.
- Never try to heat the room by leaving your gas-oven door propped open or by burning charcoal in a portable grill.
- Reduce the total number of combustion appliances in your home.

Biological pollution can cause infections, hypersensitivity diseases, and toxicosis (where biological produced toxins cause a direct toxic effect).

A well-known disease associated with indoor air contamination is legionnaire's disease. This is a type of pneumonia caused by the agent *Legionella pneumophila*, which is associated with cooling systems and whirlpool baths. Other diseases associated with poor indoor air quality include tuberculosis and humidifier fever, a flulike illness thought to be caused by biological toxins and related to exposure to amoebas, bacteria, and fungi found in humidifier reservoirs, air conditioners, and aquariums.

Allergic reactions, ranging from rhinitis, nasal congestion, inflammation of the conjunctiva, hives, and asthma, may be triggered by a number of biological agents. Notable culprits include molds, dust mites, cockroaches, rodents, birds, cats, and dogs. In addition, natural furnishing fillings, such as feathers, and the plant fiber kapok may also act as allergens.

TO REDUCE BIOLOGICAL HAZARDS

Good living practices can significantly decrease your exposure to dangerous levels of biological pollutants.

- Check that all your living spaces are adequately ventilated—open windows regularly and let air blow through the house.
- Make sure all air-conditioning, humidifying, and dehumidifying equipment is maintained according to the manufacturers' instructions and that no water is allowed to stand in them.
- Repair leaks and seepages promptly. Thoroughly clean and dry water-damaged carpets and building materials within twenty-four hours of damage or consider removing and replacing them.
- Use exhaust fans in the bathroom and kitchen, and vent your clothes dryer to the outside.
- Be aware of the family's exposure to pets.
- Vacuum carpets and upholstered furniture regularly.
- Cover mattresses with anti-dust-mite covers.
- Wash bedding and soft toys frequently at a high temperature to control dust mites.

Volatile organic compounds

Other sources of indoor air pollution are substances commonly referred to as "VOCs"—volatile organic compounds. They include formaldehyde, many pesticides, solvents such as benzene and perchloroethylene, and a number of cleaning agents. VOCs contain carbon, hence the term "organic," and as they evaporate easily at room temperature, they are described as "volatile." Most are derived from petrochemicals.

How harmful are VOCs?

Experts disagree over the level of problems they cause. Some hold the view that for the vast majority, VOCs do not cause any trouble, while for the sensitive few, they can be irritating and trigger allergylike symptoms. Others regard the accumulated vapors from VOCs as toxic and nearly all VOCs as irritating.

Most VOCs are synthetic but some—such as the citrus aroma of an orange—are natural. The range of problems they can cause includes conjunctival irritation, nose and throat discomfort, headaches, allergic skin reactions, nausea, fatigue, and dizziness.

Concentration of VOCs tends to be higher indoors than outdoors. In some cases, in a study by the Environmental Protection Agency, indoor levels were found to be ten times higher than outdoors. The worst health offenders are considered to be formaldehyde, organochlorines, and phenolic compounds (see below). The worst exposure is from home decorating, housework, and pest control.

Name that VOC

The three worst VOCs are found in a wide range of household products.

- **Formaldehyde** Used as a preservative and a binder in industry. Crops up in hundreds of household products, including furniture and fabric.
- **Organochlorine** Broad group of often powerful chemicals. Includes many pesticides, solvents, cleaning fluids, PVC (polyvinyl chloride), and PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls). (See page 347.)
- **Phenols** Include phenol (carbolic acid), which is a common disinfectant. Other phenols are synthetic resins, used in hard plastics, paints, fabric coatings, and varnishes.

SPOTLIGHT ON FORMALDEHYDE

Formaldehyde, used as a binder and preservative, has been classified in some countries as a probable human carcinogen. Opinion varies as to how serious a risk it is. Some say the amounts in household products are mostly too minute to worry about for most people, although those with allergies may find them irritating. Another theory is that although individual product levels are small, the cumulative effect may be large, especially in enclosed spaces.

The most serious levels are found in board-based products widely used in flooring, shelving (especially flat-packed furniture), foam-backed carpets and underlays, and paint preservatives.

In everyday doses, formaldehyde can be irritating to the conjunctiva and upper respiratory tract. These symptoms are temporary, depending on the length of exposure, and can produce a range of symptoms, from tingling sensations in the eyes, nose, and throat, to chest tightening and wheezing. A portion of the population, including asthmatics, is considered to be hypersensitive to formaldehyde.

Formaldehyde was a component of urea formaldehyde foam insulation (UFFI), an insulation product used in construction until the early 1980s. Formaldehyde resins are still commonly used in finishes, plywood, paneling, fiberboard, and particleboard. It also crops up in furniture and in fabric finishes, curtains, and mattress ticking.

VOCs around us

The average home contains more than 40 VOCs and there are thousands of products we use, some on a daily basis, that emit VOCs at room temperature. Most come from a remarkably long list of unremarkable household items:

- Household products, such as fabric softeners, rug cleaners, paints, lacquers and their thinners, paint strippers, and pesticides
- Personal items, such as perfumes and hairsprays
- Dry-cleaning fluids
- Building materials and home furnishings
- Office equipment, such as some copiers and printers
- Office products, such as correction fluids and carbonless copy paper
- Graphics and craft materials such as glues, adhesives, permanent markers, and photographic solutions

HOW HIGH IS YOUR VOC EXPOSURE?

The greater your number of “yes” answers, the higher your risk of exposure to VOCs.

Do you:

- live in a mobile home or a new home containing a lot of pressed wood products?
- handle chemicals for crafts, graphic arts, and/or photography in your job or hobby?
- use chemical cleaners extensively in the home?

Have you recently:

- acquired new pressed-wood furniture?
- renovated the house?
- used pesticides, paints, or solvents?

How to reduce your exposure to VOCs

- Ensure your house is well ventilated and increase ventilation when using products that emit VOCs.
- Do not store opened containers of unused paints and similar materials inside the home.
- Avoid sources of VOCs wherever possible.
- Avoid permanent-press fabric and mattress ticking if you are sensitive to formaldehyde.

Board and VOCs

The popular building material, board, is made from wood components bonded with glue or resin that is made with the VOC formaldehyde. The term “board” includes laminated board, particleboard, hardboard, and MDF (medium-density fiberboard). As it is cheap and versatile, board is used in flooring, roofing, shelving, and furniture—most mass-produced modern furniture contains some board. Veneer furniture, which

might look like solid wood, is actually a thin layer of “solid” wood overlaying a board structure.

Board outgases by far the highest levels of formaldehyde in the first few weeks and months of its life, after which these levels gradually decrease. MDF contains the highest level of formaldehyde, while laminated board furniture leaks the least.

To reduce your exposure to formaldehyde from board furniture, try to air new furniture for a week or two in a dry place under cover, paint exposed board with several layers of paint or varnish, and, where possible, choose solid wood, glass, or metal instead (for shelving, for instance).

Other chemical pollutants

Air can also carry other pollutants, such as the heavy metals lead and mercury, as well as asbestos and the gases radon and ozone.

LEAD

Lead poisoning can have a long-term impact on children’s development. Toxicity in children can manifest itself as an acute illness, with symptoms of irritability, abdominal pain, marked ataxia (lack of coordination and clumsiness), and seizures or loss of consciousness. Symptoms in adults include headache, nausea, weight loss, constipation, fatigue, and personality changes.

Children can get lead poisoning if they ingest flakes or dust particles of old lead-containing paint. Although the lead content of gas has been reduced in many countries, even in those where it is now banned in gas, in places of heavy traffic lead remains in nearby soil and can become airborne and enter dwellings either through windows and doors or on feet. Lead is also a constituent of numerous arts and craft materials. Polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, is a widely used plastic that sometimes contains the poisonous metals lead and cadmium as stabilizers. (It also contains plasticizers, which may also be dangerous if ingested.)

See “The Living Room,” page 245, for advice on dealing with lead paint in your home.

MERCURY

The presence of lead in old paint has been widely publicized; not so the presence of mercury in new paint. Some interior latex paints contain phenylmercuric acetate, or PMA, as a preservative. PMA is now banned in the United States.

ASBESTOS

Long-term exposure to asbestos can cause cancer. It was once widely used in structural fireproofing and may still be found in heating systems, acoustic insulation, ceiling tiles, and shingles in old houses. It was also formerly used in fireplace gloves, ironing board covers, and some hair dryers. When material containing asbestos is damaged or starts to disintegrate, microscopic fibers are dispersed into the air—for up to thirty years. If they find their way into human lungs, they can cause

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