

A Healthier Home

Choose safe, natural alternatives to chemical-laden furnishings and décor.

BY GINEVRA HOLTkamp

Building, renovating and decorating our homes involves making thousands of choices, and trying to choose healthy furnishings and décor can make the process even more complicated. Unfortunately, many home décor products are mass-produced with chemical-laden synthetic materials and little to no regard for the health threats they can pose. While in most cases safer alternatives exist, they can often be more expensive or more difficult to find, and even most furnishings designed with health and sustainability in mind are imperfect. But any shade of green—especially when it comes to indoor air quality and your health—is better than brown. Be informed. Start small. And make the best choices whenever you can.

One of the best ways to improve the health of our homes is to remove sources of indoor air pollution—but identifying them can be tricky. Toxic chemicals lurk in everything from shower curtains and sheets to couch cushions and the carpet beneath your feet. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) warns that thousands of items, many of them common household products, furnishings and building materials, emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs), chemicals that are released into the air at room temperature. Breathing these pollutants is linked to myriad health problems including sore eyes, burning in the nose and throat, headaches, fatigue, reproductive disorders, respiratory illnesses, heart disease, cancer and other serious long-term conditions. To help improve the quality of your indoor air and protect your family's health, choose materials and products that release the fewest possible pollutants. Here are some guidelines to help you create a home that is beautiful, sustainable and safe.

Sit back and relax. Pottery Barn's eco-friendly PB Comfort collection features extra-deep soy-based cushions, sustainably harvested wood and recycled steel springs. Available in a wide range of configurations including sofas, loveseats, sectionals and armchairs, each piece can be upholstered or slip-covered in untreated organic cotton canvas and is completely free of brominated fire retardants. Slip-covered 3-Piece Sectional with Wedge, starting at \$2,999.



WOOD FURNITURE

Whenever possible, choose solid wood over pressed wood products. Bookcases, dressers, cabinets and other seemingly “wood” furniture are often made from particleboard, plywood or medium-density fiberboard (MDF)—all of which outgas formaldehyde. According to the EPA, this colorless, pungent-smelling gas can cause eye, nose and throat irritation; wheezing and coughing; fatigue; skin rash; and severe allergic reactions. It has also been shown to cause cancer in animals and is classified as a human carcinogen by the World Health Organization.

Although solid wood furniture is often more expensive than its pressed-wood counterparts, it is also generally higher-quality and won't need to be replaced in a few years. If you're considering a wood piece, check carefully to make sure it is solid wood. Many manufacturers save on production by constructing the front from solid wood and the back, sides, shelves and drawer bottoms of particleboard or plywood. Also consider the finish on solid-wood furniture. Ideally, you want furniture with low-VOC water-based or wax finishes. If your furniture has a standard finish, air it out before bringing it inside and ventilate the room once you do. You can also purchase unfinished wood pieces and apply your own nontoxic wood finish or paint.

Secondhand or antique furniture is another excellent option for health and sustainability. In the past, furniture was more often made from solid wood, so search for wood furniture at antique or secondhand stores, garage and estate sales, auctions and on Craigslist. Buying secondhand furniture made with pressed wood products is also safer than buying new, as formaldehyde emissions decrease as products age.

If you do buy new pressed wood products, ask about the formaldehyde content and only purchase low-emitting products. IKEA offers affordable solid and veneered wood furniture sourced from sustainably managed forests that meets or exceeds stringent emissions guidelines set by the European Union. In the United States, products certified by Greenguard and the California Air Resources Board (CARB) meet similar standards. And if you do buy or already own furniture you suspect may be emitting formaldehyde, don't worry. AFM Safecoat makes several sealants specifically designed to reduce chemical outgassing.



This sturdy dining table has a recycled steel base and reclaimed chestnut top, and the chairs are handcrafted from solid FSC-certified wood. Room & Board products are CARB-compliant—ensuring safe indoor air quality. Soren chair, \$399; Parsons table, \$1,369.

RESOURCES

FURNITURE

IKEA
ikea.com
sustainably sourced solid and veneered wood; meets EU emissions guidelines

The Joinery
thejoinery.com
handcrafted from FSC-certified wood

Martha's Vineyard Furniture Co.
mvfurnitureco.com
sustainably sourced solid wood and zero-VOC paint

Pottery Barn
potterybarn.com
solid and reclaimed wood; some finished with wax

Room & Board
roomandboard.com
solid and pressed wood (most sustainably sourced); CARB-compliant

Sundance Catalog
sundancecatalog.com
reclaimed wood furniture

Urban Woods
urbanwoods.net
solid reclaimed wood; low-VOC, water-based stains

VivaTerra
vivaterra.com
reclaimed wood furniture

FINISHES

3M LeadCheck Swabs
leadcheck.com
instantly test antique and vintage painted furniture for lead

AFM Safecoat
afmsafecoat.com
natural-pigment, formaldehyde-free stains and sealers

Paint Primer

Thanks to environmental regulations and growing demand, most paint manufacturers offer low- or zero-VOC paints and finishes. But these products may still contain chemical-based pigments, binders and additives. If you really want to go *au naturel*, try milk or clay paint, made with plant and mineral ingredients. Good sources include Unearthed Paints (unearthedpaints.com), American Clay (americanclay.com), The Old Fashioned Milk Paint Company (milkpaint.com) and The Real Milk Paint Co. (realmilkpaint.com).

UPHOLSTERED FURNITURE

Upholstered furniture is among the most difficult items to find constructed with healthy materials. Unfortunately, most furniture fabrics and foams contain chemicals that are bad for our health and the environment. Pillows, cushions and padding are usually made from polyurethane foam—a petroleum-intensive product that breaks down over time and emits fine particles of chemical dust. If furniture was made before 2005, the foam is likely to contain polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs)—a toxic class of fire-retardant chemicals that accumulate in people and wildlife and disrupt brain development and hormone systems, according to the Environmental Working Group (EWG). The type of PBDE used in foam products was pulled from the U.S. market in 2004 because of safety concerns, so you shouldn't have to worry about new purchases. However, it's still wise to ask manufacturers what type of fire retardants they use and avoid products with brominated fire retardants (the group PBDEs belong to).

Better yet, choose less-flammable natural stuffing such as wool, natural latex, kapok (a down-like substance that surrounds Ceiba tree seeds) and organic cotton batting. Although these alternatives are not widely available in ready-made form (see Resources), a local upholsterer may be able to create new cushions for wood-framed furniture or refurbish the cushions on your old couch. Never reupholster foam furniture yourself, which can release PBDEs or other potentially harmful fire retardants. PBDEs are released more easily when furniture covers are torn, so replace or repair foam items with damaged covers.

Also keep in mind that upholstery fabrics are often treated with fire retardants and chemicals to help prevent stains and wrinkles. Polyester, rayon and other common synthetic upholstery textiles are made with nonrenewable resources, and the manufacturing process often involves the use of carcinogenic chemicals such as benzene, toluene, arsenic and heavy metals. Fortunately, increasingly available natural, untreated fabrics such as organic cotton, linen, wool, hemp or silk provide healthy alternatives with lower ecological impacts.



Upholstery pieces from Rowe and its other brands Clayton Marcus (pictured) and Robin Bruce include sustainably sourced wood and soy-based cushions that are free of brominated fire retardants. Upholstery options include untreated cotton and linen fabrics dyed at facilities certified by the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS). Montauk sofa, starting at \$1,450; Benton chair, starting at \$430; Talbot ottoman, starting at \$430.

RESOURCES

Cisco Brothers
ciscobrothers.com
Inside Green line: no flame retardants; natural latex foam; organic textiles; FSC-certified frames; water-based adhesives

EcoBalanza
ecobalanza.com
natural latex foam; locally sourced organic wool, organic hemp and recycled fabrics; FSC-certified frames; Greenguard-certified adhesives

Ekla Home
eklahome.com
no flame retardants; organic natural latex foam; organic textiles; FSC-certified frames; nontoxic wood finishes; water-based adhesives

Environment
environmentfurniture.com
soy-based foam available; upholstered in reclaimed Army tents

Furniture
furniture.com
no flame retardants;

natural latex foam or wool cushions; organic textiles; FSC-certified frames; nontoxic finishes; water-based adhesives

Lee Industries
leeindustries.com
soy-based cushions; recycled fiber filling; some organic fabrics; FSC-certified frames; recycled springs; water-based finishes

Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams
mgbwhome.com
soy-based cushions; cotton, linen and hemp fabrics; sustainably sourced wood frames; water-based glues

Pottery Barn
potterybarn.com
PB Comfort line: soy-based cushions; sustainably harvested wood frames; available in untreated organic cotton canvas

Rowe
rowefurniture.com
soy-based cushions; fabrics certified by the Global Organic Textile Standard; sustainably sourced frames



FLOR carpet tiles are made with recycled fibers, and many are certified low-VOC by the Carpet and Rug Institute Green Label program. 100 percent recycled Parallel Reality in Pink, \$5 a square foot.

FLOORING

Because flooring covers a lot of surface area in our homes, it has the potential to release a lot of chemicals. Conventional carpet is made of synthetic petroleum-based fiber that can emit as many as 120 hazardous chemicals including pesticides, neurotoxic solvents and carcinogens. These toxic chemicals are found in the rubber padding, adhesives and carpet itself, and they can take years to outgas. Carpet also traps in dust, mold and environmental toxins tracked in from outside, and typical carpet cleaners contain harmful ingredients such as brighteners and antibacterial agents.

Your best bet is to remove wall-to-wall carpeting and replace it with a healthier alternative such as wood, natural linoleum, stained concrete, ceramic tile or cork. During removal, wear protective gear (mask, safety glasses and gloves) and isolate the area from the rest of your home. Mist carpet with water until its backing and padding are damp enough to keep dust down. If you're renting or your budget won't allow new floors, enforce a no-shoe policy and vacuum often with a HEPA-filter vacuum.

When choosing new flooring, consider materials that are healthy and sustainable. FSC-certified or reclaimed hardwood is a good choice. Be sure to choose solid wood flooring—not laminate or engineered, which are often glued with adhesives that emit formaldehyde. Sustainably harvested cork, bamboo, natural linoleum and recycled-content ceramic tile are other good options. You can find Greenguard-certified products at greenguard.org. Whenever possible, select low- or no-VOC factory-finished flooring, which will eliminate the need to stain and seal flooring inside your home. If the flooring is unfinished, use water-based stains and sealants and ventilate the work area. For healthier subflooring, use exterior-grade plywood (aired out and sealed) instead of interior-grade. Although exterior-grade pressed wood contains formaldehyde, it emits less than interior products.

If you want healthy indoor air but still crave something soft underfoot, warm up hard surfaces with area rugs made from organic cotton or wool, which you can wash more easily or take outdoors to air out. If you prefer carpet, you can find low-emitting carpet and padding certified by the Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) Green Label program. (Install it with carpet tacks instead of glue.) Organic wool carpet not treated with mothproofing pesticides is another good option. It's expensive, but it can last up to 50 years and is naturally flame-, stain- and mold-resistant. You might also consider carpet tiles, which can be cleaned and replaced piece-by-piece.



RESOURCES

AltruWood
altruwood.com
 reclaimed and FSC-certified wood

Ambient Bamboo Floors
ambientbamboo.com
 FSC-certified, CARB-compliant bamboo

Eco-Friendly Flooring
ecofriendlyflooring.com
 bamboo; cork; recycled glass, wood and metal

FLOR
flor.com
 recycled-content carpet tiles; many CRI Green Label-certified

Forbo
forbo-flooring.us
 natural linoleum; Click line features glueless installation and cork backing

Garuda Woven Art
garudawovenart.com
 handspun wool rugs with natural dyes

Nature's Carpet
naturescarpet.com
 untreated wool carpet with natural rubber and jute backing

Prairie Rugs
prairierugs.com
 recycled cotton rugs

LEFT TO RIGHT: Eco-Friendly Flooring's reclaimed Antique Red Oak starts at \$4 a square foot. ■ Forbo's Marmoleum Click natural linoleum is available in 24 colors (Raspberry shown), starting at \$7 a square foot. ■ Ambient Bamboo's Strand Woven Tiger is FSC-certified and CARB-compliant at \$4 a square foot.



1. LOUNGE ACT
 sustainably harvested solid wood frames and PBDE-free soy-based cushions; available in cotton and cotton-linen fabrics Henry sofa, 76 inches long, \$699; 86 inches long, \$899; westelm.com

2. WHOLE GRAIN
 reclaimed old-growth wood finished with water-based stain Hortencia coffee table, \$250; franczamudio1.etsy.com

3. FINE DINING
 made of solid birch and meets EU emissions guidelines Björkudden table and four Bertil chairs, \$260; ikea.com

4. HAUTE SEAT
 domestically and sustainably sourced wood frame and PBDE-free soy-based cushions; available in cotton, linen and hemp Colin wing chair, starting at \$1,620; mgbwhome.com

5. PERIOD PIECE
 sustainably sourced solid Hevea wood finished in one of 30 zero-VOC paint colors Menemsha side table, \$350; mvfurnitureco.com

6. STATELY STORAGE
 reclaimed Douglas fir finished with water-based stains and formaldehyde-free glues Classic chest of drawers, \$1,875; vivaterra.com

7. RECURRING PATTERN
 100 percent wool rug with cotton backing and natural latex adhesive; GoodWeave-certified Cyprus rug, 4½-by-6½ feet, \$765; company.com

8. COMFORT ZONE
 FSC-certified wood frame, water-based finishes, PBDE-free soy-based cushions, recycled fiber pillow filling, and organic and natural fabrics 3979-41 chair, starting at \$1,948; leeindustries.com

➔ Find many more resources for sustainable furniture and flooring online at nhandg.com/resource-guide.