

CAUTION: FLOOR MAY BE TOXIC¹

Leah Zerbe[©]

Nowadays, many of us are really trying to put our best foot forward when it comes to living healthier, greener lives. But if you're not paying attention to what you're actually walking on with those feet, you could be ignoring a major source of indoor air pollution and toxic-chemical exposure. The consumer-health-protection organization HealthyStuff.org recently published a report finding that a popular type of flooring contains nasty chemicals linked to everything from autism to infertility, cancer, and low IQ in children.

THE DETAILS: Researchers tested more than 3,300 home-improvement products, including 1,000-plus samples of flooring and more than 2,300 samples of wallpaper. Flooring included vinyl (PVC) samples, along with real linoleum (vinyl sometimes passes itself off as linoleum), bamboo, ceramic tiles, hardwood, and cork. Previous studies have found that harmful chemicals in building materials linger, creating indoor air pollution that's worse than outdoor pollution and winding up in household dust that we're exposed to every day.

PVC building materials, namely, vinyl flooring and coated wallpaper, were seven times more likely to contain hazardous additives when compared to nonplastic flooring options. Wallpaper was particularly toxic because 96 percent of samples tested contained a PVC coating.

Researchers also found heavy metals like cadmium and lead in vinyl flooring and wallpaper, along with flame retardants. These substances are linked to asthma, fertility problems, learning disability, hormone-related diseases, and cancer. Non-vinyl flooring products are half as likely to contain hazardous chemical additives. Linoleum, cork, bamboo and hardwood all tested free of lead, cadmium, mercury, and other hazardous metals.

WHAT IT MEANS: Remodeling? You may want to take a hammer to this fact: There are no effective regulations that require companies to test for contaminants in building products, or to disclose them to consumers. Interestingly, some of the harmful phthalates found in vinyl flooring in this report have been banned from children's toys. Which means some little kids will learn to crawl face-first in the same toxins that are unsafe for their playthings. Absent any regulation, it's hard to gather data on these substances, or even to be certain how many of us are exposed to them. But earlier this year, the President's Cancer Panel summarized available data on plastics and health, and suggested the precautionary principal, advising citizens to avoid phthalates, a common harmful substance found in vinyl products.

Here's how to avoid toxic flooring in your home:

Search for safe, green remodeling materials. To check the toxicity of your current home building products, or to find safer ones, search HealthyStuff.org's Home Improvement rankings. Two easy, cheap, and important ways to start eliminating toxins: Switch out vinyl shower curtains for non-PVC options like long-lasting, naturally antimicrobial hemp. And choose natural materials for your children's school supplies. (Shy away from shiny decals on book bags...these are likely PVC.)

Evict vinyl. If you're looking to embark on a green remodeling product, don't even consider vinyl flooring. In fact, avoid vinyl products of any kind whenever possible. It's dangerous for

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you, and its by-products are pollution sources for communities surrounding vinyl production plants. Instead, look for greener options like cork, bamboo, linoleum, or Forest Stewardship Council–certified wood.

Lobby for safer schools. Contact your child's school's administrators and ask them to stop purchasing building materials linked to asthma and learning problems. "Schoolchildren across the country spend their days in classrooms with chemical-laden vinyl flooring," says Mike Schade, PVC Campaign Coordinator at the Center for Health, Environment & Justice, an organization dedicated to protecting people and the environment from harmful chemicals. "Vinyl flooring in schools and homes pollutes the air our children breathe and endangers their health."

"We're not encouraging people to rip out and replace their flooring; we recognize that is not financially feasible for schools and homeowners," says Schade. "But when building and renovating schools and homes, we encourage people to avoid vinyl flooring whenever possible, as safer alternatives like linoleum are readily available."