

Furniture for a healthy house



Non-toxic furniture is an important part of creating a healthy house. It can be done fancy, or it can be done cheaply.

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A healthy house seeks to create as pristine indoor air quality as possible. This is done by modifying the house itself, and making sure the furniture and belongings are healthy as well.

How strict you need to be depends on the people who live there. People who have mild chemical sensitivities may be able to cut a lot of corners, while those who have the severe, disabling version must be very thorough.

Before you start looking at changing the furniture, or the house itself, make sure all personal care products and cleaning products are safe. ALL of them. Every can, tube, bottle, and jar in the bathroom, under the kitchen sink, and elsewhere. It rarely makes sense to modify the furniture unless you've taken care of the basics first.

How NOT to do it

The furniture in a typical American home is very unhealthy. Consider this picture of a regular living room: There is a sofa and chair with lots of upholstery, made of synthetic foam and batting, enclosed in fabric treated with stain-resistant chemicals and flame retardants.



A toxic living room

The table and the book cases are made of particle board and laminated with a teak veneer. Lots of glues in there. The veneer is supposed to be oiled once a year or so.

The two speakers are also made of particle board with a glued-on veneer.

Then there is the wall-to-wall synthetic carpet, which is treated with lots of chemicals and traps dust and mold. The fireplace is a source of soot coming down the chimney. The books and binders on the shelves can be sources of mold and dust. Entertainment electronics give off fumes when they warm up, even after years of use. The stereo has steel cabinets, but the circuit boards are the real problem.

The only things in the picture that really belong in a healthy house are the pictures on the walls, and the two lamps.

The pictures are either frame-less, or with frames of genuine wood. The fronts are glass.

The two lamps are of steel, with just the goosenecks of plastic.

The healthy materials

The materials to look for are foremost steel and glass. Aluminum is rarely used in furniture, due to cost.

Steel furniture usually has some sort of surface treatment, which is usually benign after a few weeks. We have seen one case where a paint used on a steel patio table was still not okay after three years of outdoor offgassing. Chrome or baked-on paint are the best.

Wood can work, if it is truly genuine wood and not any kind of laminate. Verify yourself, we have seen furniture advertised as “solid wood,” which was laminate anyway.

Do not use wood furniture that is intended for outdoor use, as the wood will be treated with toxic chemicals to resist rot.

The type of wood is important. Some types give off terpene smells forever, especially pine. Poplar and maple are low-terpene and much more tolerable.

Tables

The old standby here is the steel-and-glass patio table. They are simple, with a steel frame and big glass top. They are usually round.

We’ve seen models with a bunch of ceramic tiles on top, but that is not very practical for a dining or work table.



Small glass table with steel chairs

Sometimes there are steel-and-glass tables available intended for indoor use, especially as office furniture and side tables.

High-quality dining sets are sometimes available, such as shown on the first page of this article.

Chairs

Various sorts of chairs are seen in healthy households. Many are basic patio furniture, or folding chairs of steel or wood.

If you need a softer chair, use folded up cotton towels or similar, that can be removed and washed. Avoid any kind of fixed upholstery.

Many people with severe MCS are fine with chairs of plastic, after some offgassing time outside.

Sofas

Many healthy houses do not have sofas, as it is difficult to find good ones. Make sure the cushions can be removed and washed, or use a futon or comforter topper.



Wooden sofa with removable cushions

Using old furniture

Toxic furniture eventually gets better, but it may take ten years to offgas laminated wood, synthetic cushions, foams, etc. They may never become truly inert, as chemical treatments can continue to flake off the fibers. Upholstering will have gathered dust and mold since the furniture was new. There is no way to remove that without destroying the upholstery, unless there is a zipper.

Storage (shelves, cabinets, etc)

When possible, store things you don't need regularly somewhere else. A garage, storage shed, or rented storage unit may work. If using a storage unit, ask how often they spray. Some never spray, but in America most do.



Wall-mounted wire shelves storing bedding, towels, etc.

An attractive way to store things in the house is wire shelving. They are made of thin steel rods (“wires”) that are usually covered with chrome or baked-on paint. There are versions that hang on tracks screwed into the wall, or that stand on the floor. There are many versions. They can be used in the kitchen, pantry, bedroom, closets and other places. They are especially practical in desert homes, where dust gathers a lot more.

Large steel cabinets with shelves are made for office use, but can be used for anything you want more out of sight. These cabinets are painted and need some time to be offgassed.

Office supply stores and other places sell various plastic crates intended to store papers, but they can be used for all sorts of things. Just be aware that some of them are made of plastics that need six months or more to not stink anymore.

Some people buy large (30 gallon) steel trash cans to store clothes and other things in. Just make sure to wash the steel with hot soapy water to get oil residues off. They are ugly, so put them where they are out of sight.

When storing things in an unheated space (garage, shed, storage unit), make sure books, papers, clothes, and other things that can get moldy are sealed up.

Where to buy healthy furniture

The supply of furniture made of healthy materials change according to what is fashionable. Some years sleek Euro-style is in, others not. Some years patio furniture is more wood and plastic. You may have to be patient.

Building supply and hardware stores often sell patio furniture, and they may also have wire shelving on tracks. If you don't see what you need, ask if they can order it. Some have catalogs of items they can get, or look online.

Office supply stores may have some metal-and-glass desks, etc. They usually have steel filing cabinets.

We've found stand-alone wire shelves at Walmart.

Some fancy furniture stores may have metal dining tables, chairs, and more.

Look around online. Some furniture can be shipped directly to you, though you can't inspect it beforehand.

Consider going to yard sales or flea markets in upscale areas. You might find some fancy pieces that are now "out of style." They can be in remarkable good condition and just need to be washed and aired out some. Do throw out any kind of cushions.

More information

More articles about healthy homes and coping with chemical sensitivities at www.eiwellspring.org.