

How to buy or rent a regular house for someone with environmental illness



What to look for when renting or buying a house for someone with environmental illnesses (chemical or electrical sensitivities).

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People with environmental sensitivities (chemicals, mold, electrical) need healthy houses to live in. They are hard to find. Often, people have to live in houses that are “acceptable,” but not great. It may get better over time, as it airs out, and renovations are done with healthy materials, but it is much easier if the house is at least close to okay to start with.

The problem with rentals

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Rentals are tougher than buying your own house, as you are much more limited in what you can do to make it safer. If the carpet is old, the landlord may allow you to pull it up, but otherwise you are limited to covering it somehow.

You can spend money on repairs and upgrades that the landlord is not interested in doing, but the day you move out again those investments are lost.

In some areas it is the law that rentals must be painted before a new tenant moves in. Perhaps you can convince the landlord to “forget” doing the painting.

Rentals also tend to be maintained more poorly than owned houses. A study in Australia found that rental units were much more likely to be moldy, as leaks were not fixed so promptly.

Don't get overwhelmed

There is a lot to consider when looking at a house. It is easy to become overwhelmed.

Don't try to cover everything during your first visit to the house. Most houses will obviously not work and you won't need a detailed checklist to know it.

If a house seems promising, then come back for a second visit with a detailed checklist. Since you are now familiar with the house, you can also make a more tailored checklist.

If you have a friend who has experience with MCS/EHS housing, bring them along on the second visit. Don't bring such a friend for the first visit as there will be many houses that obviously won't work, and you'll wear out your friendship prematurely.

If you are really inexperienced in house hunting, maybe bring such a friend along a couple times, as a training for you.

Working with a realtor

The traditional way to buy a house is through a realtor. You tell the realtor what kind of house you are looking for and the realtor then arranges a tour of what is available in the area.

This can also work for a buyer with chemical or electrical sensitivities. It is best to find a realtor who has dealt with the environmentally ill before. Ask around the local community for a referral, or call up the local realtors and ask.

Even if there isn't one in your area, it may still work if the realtor is willing to learn. Don't go into much detail, just say that an exceptionally good indoor air quality is paramount and what your basic criteria are.

You should give the realtor a short list of requirements for the house that the realtor will readily know. Besides the usual list of how many bedrooms, etc., the list could include a few no-no's such as:

- Not on a busy street
- No gas appliances
- No basement or crawlspace
- Not newer than ten years

Make up your own list, but make it short and general. And don't include things the realtor wouldn't know, such as prior pesticide use or recent renovations.

Be aware that the realtor does not work for you, but works for the seller. The realtor has very strong financial reasons to sell you a house – any house.

In the United States there are a few “buyer's realtors” who are hired by the buyer and thus are more motivated to find the best house for you, rather than a house that is merely “good enough.”

Online listings

Listings of houses for sale or rent are available online in many countries, but the descriptions are rarely informative about health factors.

There are sometimes websites and newsletters that specialize in “green” homes. These can be helpful, but be aware that “green” and “healthy” are not the same. Many “green” features are actually unhealthy, or possibly so. Examples are the use of recycled materials, some paints, and energy-saving electronics. A house can have a stellar rating as “green” and still be unlivable.

There are sometimes websites and newsletters for the environmentally ill which carry housing ads. They seem to come and go, even in the United States, so ask around.

Apartments

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Apartments are inherently less safe than detached houses. The shared walls are seldomly airtight, especially through electrical outlets, and sometimes even hidden holes, which can transfer cigarette smoke, pesticides, and fragrances.

Dryer vents and open windows are other hazards.

It is best to get an end-unit, as there are fewer shared walls. Upstairs units are better in complexes that use chemical lawn care services.

The age of the house

There is a sweet spot where a house is not too new and not too old. A house that is less than ten years old may still be offgassing some of the building materials.

Once a house is older than twenty years, there is more upkeep which brings in fresh building materials. Mold is also more likely to be a problem.

This ten-to-twenty range is just a ballpark figure. There will be plenty of exceptions, especially if the house is built of solid materials, such as brick and tile.

The lot

Make sure the house is not in a small valley where wood smoke and other pollutants can gather on calm days.

The house should not be in a low spot where rain and runoffs can gather and create mold problems.

The outer walls

You'd want a house that rarely, if ever, needs painting. Outdoor paint is very toxic, meaning you may have to move out for weeks or months.

That means avoiding wooden planks or wood-plate siding. You could remove such siding and replace it with cement board siding. That could make good sense if the old siding needs replacement anyway, which should lower the price of the house.

If you are renting, ask the landlord when they expect to paint the exterior.

The roof

What is the condition of the roof? Look for signs of leaks in the attic, which can create mold.

If it is the typical American tar shingle roof, look to see if the shingles are all flat, or showing age by being warped. A roofer or a building inspector can tell you how much life is left in a roof.

A worn-out shingle roof should not deter you, unless there is damage underneath. If the roof needs replacement, that should reduce the price of the house and then you could install a much better roof of steel or tile.

Wooden shingles must be avoided or replaced, as they are mold hazards. They should be of a rot-resistant type of wood, but may still be treated with fungicides.

Avoid houses with flat roofs, unless they are cast of concrete and have no cracks. Flat roofs are notorious for developing leaks – even in a desert.

The foundation

A concrete slab foundation is usually preferable. Basements and crawlspaces are best avoided as they are notorious for gathering moisture and mold, which can rise into the rest of the house. Especially avoid basements and crawlspaces with a dirt floor.

Mold loves cold, dark, and damp spaces that are poorly ventilated. A sump pump will not help much on this.

Garage

A garage can be very useful for offgassing things and storage, as long as there is a good door into the house (or no door), and the wall is solid without holes. If the garage is attached to the house, you should never park a car there, unless it is electric. A car with a gasoline or diesel engine will spew exhaust that can enter the house. Such cars can also have engines with oil leaks, and they can stink of small spills of oil or fuel.

Smell the house

The first you'll notice walking inside the house is how it smells. If it smells moldy, that is almost always a showstopper. It is really difficult to remove pervasive mold. Find a better house.

If the house is heavily fragranced, that should also stop you. It will take several years to remove from the house, and you don't know if it is there to hide a musty smell. It's not worth the big risk.

A lightly fragranced house can probably be cleaned up. In most cultures fragrances are so pervasive you may never find a suitable house without some fragrances in it.

Look for electric fragrance devices (“plug ins,” diffusers, etc.) and scented candles. They all create a waxy coating on walls, floors, and ceilings that is really hard to remove.

If the house smells of tobacco smoke, that is another fatal problem. The smoke particles get into every little cavity, including inside walls, where they cannot be removed from. The seller may try to cover the tobacco smell with fragrances. Look for ash trays and a yellow-brown tint on white surfaces, ceiling lights, etc. A smoked-in house is nearly impossible to detox.

The walls

What are the walls covered with? The best materials are genuine materials, such as brick or plaster, but such are rare in America.

Avoid manufactured wood boards and boards covered with vinyl wall paper (common in mobile homes).

Wallpaper of paper material should be avoided. The paper itself and the paste that glues it to the wall can be moldy. In newer houses they can contain fungicides to deter mold growth.

The floors

The best is a tile floor or a true hardwood floor.

If there is a carpet, it can be removed, with several options for a replacement. Carpets are toxic in themselves and almost always harbor dust, mold, and pesticides. They are impossible to fully clean, even with heavy-duty professional equipment. They simply do not belong in a healthy house.

Most newer “hardwood” floors are actually fake. They are made of plastic, wood laminates, glued bamboo or similar. Still, they are much better than carpeting and may be fine once a few years old.

If you cannot replace the floor material, you may be able to cover it. People have used galvanized steel plates, laminated aluminum foil, and polyethylene plastic.

The kitchen

The kitchen should have at least one window that opens to the outdoors.

Some kitchens have vent hoods without ducts. They just have a small filter that traps smoke particles. One that vents to the outside is much better.

The cabinets are probably made of toxic wood boards, perhaps with a real-wood door. You'll likely need to seal or replace these cabinets.

Carpeting is unacceptable in a kitchen, as it soaks up moisture, spills, and food particles.

The bathroom

The bathroom should have a window to the outside. A high-volume fan is a plus.

Carpeting does not belong in a wet environment.

Look for water damage and mold

Water damage can both be a structural problem and a mold problem. Old wooden houses and houses with flat roofs are notorious for water damage.

A regular building inspector should find any major water damage and rot, but you may want to look for it yourself too.

Look up at the ceiling for any telltale grey patches or other discoloration.

Look closely in any area where water is used, such as bathrooms, laundry area, kitchen, dish washer, etc. Look under and behind sinks, commodes, and appliances.

Try to step closely around the toilet and other water appliances. Is the floor firm or soft there? A soft spot may mean the wood underneath is rotten and moldy, due to water leaks.

Look around the windows, both outside and inside. Are there signs of wetness around the windows on the inside, from condensation? Condensation is much more likely if there is just one layer of glass (single pane).

If the roof has a "valley" (where two sections of the roof meet), look closely if the flashing is in good condition.

Look under the rain gutters. If they do not drain well, water will back up and can cause rot on any wood behind them.

Where does the water from the roof go? Will it run away from the house or puddle against the foundation or wall?

Look into the attic. If there was (or is) a roof leak it should show as discoloration on the underside of the roof (for typical American roofs with plywood under shingles).

Ventilation system

If the house has a ventilation system, check it for problems.

If there is an outside air intake, where is it located? Bad places are in the garage and in crawlspaces, basements, etc.

How is the air returning to the furnace/AC? Most houses have no return ducts; the furnace/AC just takes air from the room it is in, which can be a problem if a moldy basement. Some use dedicated ducts, which is good.

Some houses use a plenum system, where the air returns through the wall cavities without any ducts. These cannot be cleaned and should be avoided.

Air ducts of steel are best, as they can be cleaned. Flexible ducts cannot be cleaned.

Some people install electric baseboard heaters to avoid using the air ducts in the winter. Air ducts are less hazardous with cool air in the summer.

Pesticides

The United States Environmental Protection Agency did their Healthy Homes Survey in 2005-2006, where they tested the floors of five hundred homes for pesticide residue. They found pesticides in more than 90% of the homes.

The use of pesticides varies dramatically with the culture. Americans love the stuff, Europeans rarely use it.

Ask the seller if they:

- Used an extermination service
- Sprayed pesticides themselves

- Had the house treated for termites
- Used a lawn care service

Is the house next to a golf course or field where pesticides are used? Such pesticides can drift into your house when they spray, and dust laden with pesticides can blow in or get tracked in on shoes.

Gas appliances

Gas should simply not be used inside a healthy house. If there are gas appliances you can remove them and cap the gas line *outside* the house. But the fragrance added to the gas may have contaminated the house already.

The only appropriate use of gas is for a boiler or water heater that is located outside the building, such as in an outside closet or outbuilding. Outdoor barbecues are okay.

Electromagnetic radiation

Where does the electricity enter the house? All the power will pass through the room behind the service entrance, so it better not be a room you'll spend a lot of time in. The main breaker box is usually located where the power comes in. Another clue is any overhead line.

Moving the main breaker box is expensive, as it'll require rerouting all the electrical circuits.

Where is the electrical meter? It will likely be a wireless transmitter. If it isn't now, it will probably become one in the future. It is often possible to move the meter to a pedestal in the yard, or a garage, but it is not cheap to do.

It is best if the bedroom you intend to use is on the opposite end of the house than where the electricity enters the house, so no wires pass through it.

It is also best if major electrical appliances are away from your bedroom.

A solar power system can be a lot of trouble for sensitive people, especially if the panels are on the roof of the house and the inverter is inside the house. They cause massive dirty electricity, unless it is a fully analog DC-only system, which is extremely rare.

Look for three-pin grounded outlets in each room. Old houses may not have these.

If you are very electrically sensitive, pay attention to ground currents. That is electricity running in the soil, between the transformer, well and main breaker panel. If they are draped around the house, the ground currents may run under the house. If the transformer, well, and main panel are all on the same side of the house, then there are probably not ground currents under the house.

At your second visit you may want to measure the electromagnetic radiation around the house, or you can hire an environmental inspector. How to do the measurements is described in separate articles available through the link at the bottom.

Beware of deceptions

Every seller wants their house to present well. That is usually quite innocent, such as making sure the lawn is mowed and the house is tidy and clean. But there can be cases of outright deception too.

A common deception is to fragrance a house so it masks the smell of mold.

In one house there was a big plant hanging from the ceiling in an outside corner. It was there to hide water damage on the ceiling.

If the house is freshly painted, did that cover some moldy spots?

Look behind any kind of furniture that is placed up against a wall. Is it hiding water damage, mold or cracks?

If the owner won't let you inspect any part of the house, such as the attic, that is a red flag. What are they hiding?

The distraction game

Some sellers and realtors try to distract you when looking at a house. They keep up a friendly chitchat to keep your attention away from looking too closely at the house.

You can prevent that by bringing a friend along. Instruct the friend to do the chatting with the seller.

If you come alone, you can politely tell the seller after the initial tour that it is nice to chat, but you need to focus now. If the seller would be so kind to wait outside or in another room.

Some sellers may put pressure on you by saying there are others interested in the house, which may or may not be true.

The house inspector

Once you've determined this looks like a good house to buy, it is time for a professional house inspection. You may even want two inspections.

A professional house inspector is licensed to do the work and is hired by you.

The inspector will crawl around every nook and cranny of the house and look for structural damage, shoddy repair work, major mold or water damage, dangerous wiring, rodent infestations, and much else. Just saving you from crawling around a dusty attic filled with insulation is worth the money.

Expect a detailed written report, but you'd want to be present for the inspection. Inspectors can give you a lot of *informal* observations that can be very valuable, but won't be in the report.

A regular inspector is only concerned about major problems, according to the guidelines in your area. A house too moldy for a sensitized person can easily pass this inspection. And they do not use a gaussmeter to check for wiring problems.

If the house passes the regular inspection, you may want to hire an environmental inspector also. Unfortunately, finding a good one is difficult. There is no licensing board for those, and their competences vary enormously. They are often building biologists, but such a certification takes little effort to get. Many can only do a basic job, but if that is more than you can do yourself, it may be worth it.

A really good one may not be available locally, so you may need to pay for travel and a hotel.

Test kits

You can do some environmental tests yourself. A regular house inspector won't do these, though an environmental inspector might.

These tests should not be done on your first visit, wait until you really think the house might work.

There are various mold test kits available. Some are attached to a vacuum cleaner.

Ideally, you should test each bedroom, each bathroom, and the living room. If you need to save money, focus on the rooms you are likely to use the most.

If the house is in an area with rocks, you may also want to do a radon test.

Neighborhood

Is the area covered by covenants or a homeowner association? Those are usually focused on protecting the property values, especially how neat the neighborhood looks. They can cause you a lot of trouble, such as demanding you use a toxic lawncare company and forbid the use of clotheslines and leaving things outside to outgas.

Walk around the neighborhood and look for trouble, such as toxic businesses (gas station, laundromat, BBQ restaurant, etc.). Also look for chimneys for fireplaces (gas chimneys may look differently). Any big power lines or radio towers?

Visit the neighborhood on a weekday evening and a weekend afternoon when people are home, so you can observe what that is like. Perhaps chat with people out in their yards; they may give you useful information about the neighborhood, especially about the next-door neighbors.

There is a more detailed article about checking out a neighborhood, which is available on the link below.

Stepping stone

If you can't find or afford what you really need, maybe you can find something that can be a stepping stone. It'll be better than what you presently have, and then you can look for something really good without urgency. And maybe the "stepping stone" will turn out better than you expect. Maybe you will get stronger from living there so you become better able to look for housing.

If you want to move to another area, you may need a stepping stone to get there and then look for something better.

If you hold out for the perfect place, you may be stuck in your present home for many years. This writer used two stepping stone houses (both rentals).

More information

Articles about renovating and financing healthy homes, checking the location, and measuring the EMF radiation are available on www.eiwellspring.org/saferhousing.html.

