

Be a Healthy Home Hunter

Think About IAQ BEFORE You Buy or Rent

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When looking to purchase a new home or rent an apartment, it's important to look beyond the size of the home or the amenities in the kitchen and ask yourself, "will it be healthy for me and my family?"

Levels of pollutants indoors (radon, mold, carbon monoxide, lead, asbestos, volatile organic compounds, air toxics, pet and rodent dander) are often 2-5 times higher—and may be 100 times higher—than outdoor levels. Numerous studies confirm a broad range of health problems caused by indoor environmental exposures: headaches, fatigue, nausea, aggravation of asthma and allergies, transmission of infectious respiratory diseases, and life-threatening poisonings. Indoor pollutants in homes and apartments are of significant concern because most Americans spend 90% of their time indoors, with most of that time spent at home.

The best way to ensure you don't end up in a home or apartment that might make you sick is to conduct a thorough walk-through inspection of the property for specific issues that can impact your health and safety.

When Buying a Home

Prepare to inspect the home yourself, and don't depend on a bank-supplied home inspector to find all the issues for you. Alternatively, hire the services of an independent home inspector who works for you, not the bank or the seller. The seller must disclose certain things by law (Title 33, Ch. 7, Subchapter 1-A, 173), if they have knowledge of the issue. Otherwise, they can state, "Unknown." The two categories that could capture water, moisture, or mold issues are "4. Hazardous Materials" or "5. Known Defects."

Be aware, however, that the seller's disclosure statement is not a warranty by law—the seller is not obligated to do any testing or investigative work. And if the landlord or seller refuses to allow follow-up verification or testing, consider this a red flag and be prepared to walk away from the deal.

When Renting an Apartment or House

When renting, follow the same approach as buying a home. Protect yourself by verifying any claims made by the landlord or his/her representative. Insist that proof of repairs, reports and any other information you need be provided before signing an agreement. Legally, the landlord must provide the smoking policy and radon test results, and disclose information on energy efficiency, bed bugs, and smoke detectors. However, there is no requirement for disclosure of water leakage, mold, lead, rodents, ventilation air, exhaust air, or other pests. These issues can significantly impact your health and well-being, particularly if you have children or if someone in the household has asthma or chronic illness. Maine does have an "implied warranty of habitability," which would include, for example, drinkable water, adequate and safe heat (68°F in the winter), an envelope that does not leak water, windows that aren't broken and adequate pest control.

Pay particular attention to moisture in any finished basement space, especially if carpeted.



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What to Look for When Buying or Renting a Home

OUTSIDE

AREA	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	CONCERNS
Walls	Peeling or blistering paint, warping or loose siding and popped nails, new paint in patches	Moisture problems and possible cover up
Roof	Roof shingles that are discolored, breaking, warping or growing moss; poorly maintained gutters or gutters that discharge near foundation; Check for presence of soffit, ridge or gable vents.	Water leakage, structural damage, mold growth, ice dams. No soffit vents might indicate moisture trouble if roof not originally designed as a "hot" roof. If in doubt, <i>ask</i> .
Foundation	Ground slopes away from home, cracks/holes in stone foundation, concrete or block; visible footing drain discharge.	Water leakage into basement, access for pests
Systems	Match vent hoods outside to exhaust fans inside; stuck dampers; sooty boiler/furnace discharge; presence of a radon mitigation system	Moisture discharge into home instead of outdoors; re-entrainment of fumes and CO into home; test home for radon even if it has an air or water system already installed.

INSIDE

AREA	WHAT TO LOOK FOR	CONCERNS
Entrance	Take note of what you smell upon first entering the home.	Odors can indicate a variety of problems: moisture, ventilation, heating system, rodents, VOCs, sewer gasses, pet waste. Presence of air fresheners and candles may represent attempt to cover up.
Walls & Ceilings, including under cabinets, behind furniture, and fixtures.	Mold, water stains, condensation, peeling or blistering paint, new paint in areas	Roof/water leakage; plumbing leaks; elevated humidity, mold and structural damage; possible cover-up.
Flooring	Old stained carpets	Mold, insects, bacteria
Attic and Basement	Dark sheathing or staining in attic; rodent nests and scat; intact insulation; wet basement areas or dehumidifier use. Ask yourself: "do you like breathing the air in this basement?"	Mold and moisture issues; pest infestations, high levels of humidity, improper attic venting. Any moisture/mold in basement will eventually move upward to rest of building due to stack effect)
Systems	Ask to review maintenance records of heating systems, look for fans that are vented <i>outdoors</i> , especially bathrooms and kitchens and clothes dryers.	Carbon monoxide poisoning, poor efficiency, and combustion pollutants indoors, proper ventilation of high polluting areas.