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Ways to find out whether your house has fiberglass contamination

By Robert Horowitz

A fiberglass contaminated home is more common than you might think.

The widespread use of fiberglass insulation and exposed-fiberglass-lined ducts in modern--particularly American--construction is sowing the seeds for an environmental health catastrophe. Overall shoddy construction standards on today's mass-produced homes further increase the odds that there is some amount of fiberglass in your home environment..

Many people will never notice a small amount of fiberglass in their living space. But that same amount could trigger an intense allergy-like reaction in a person with a damaged immune system. With moderate amounts of fiberglass in the living space, nearly all occupants become progressively ill over a period of weeks or months. When large amounts of fiberglass are present in the home, even the most robust individuals become noticeably ill within a few days or weeks.

The signs of fiberglass poisoning in your home are straightforward and obvious to even the mildly observant person:

- Pervasive dustiness, even after repeated cleanings
- Glass-like dust which glitters when struck by light.
- Most or all individuals in the home, including pets, have strange illnesses which do not respond to conventional treatments, especially skin and breathing ailments
- Ill individuals feel better when out of the house for extended periods of time.
- Individuals feel worse when the heating or air conditioning is on.
- Strange stains around or under HVAC output areas.

If some or all of these symptoms are present, then it's time to do some sleuthing.

If you are convinced that your health woes are worse when the heating or air conditioning is on, buy some wide, clear cellophane tape. Partially cover the registers of the heating/ac system, then run it for several hours. If the tape becomes covered with glassy dust, then you may have found the source of your problems.

Another quick test is to shine a strong flashlight in the dark. If you observe glimmering fiber-like particles, you have more reason to continue sleuthing.

To find out more about what is coming out of the ducts, you may hire an industrial hygienist to run some

scientifically acceptable tests. The test mediums may be taken to a laboratory and analyzed under a scanning electron microscope or similar device. Such analysis can tell you how many fibers there are and their sizes, but may not be able to tell you the composition of the fibers (i.e. glass, asbestos, slag etc.)

Your hygienist may also be able to do a "wipe" test. To do one of these, find some area in the house which does not get disturbed or dusted often. Wipe some of the dust onto a perfectly clean cloth or paper medium, and place that into a clean plastic bag. Whatever shows up on that towel is what you are breathing.

Some environmental testing companies offer lower-cost testing which you can do yourself, then send to their lab. One such company is Pure Air Controls of Tampa, Florida.

As soon as you surmise there is a problem with fiberglass in your home, begin keeping detailed notes. Include any health symptoms you or your family members experience each day, any professional interaction which occurs (doctor visits, heating/ac repairmen, landlords, builders), as well as anything you may observe about the house (AC on, conditions very dusty; for instance). These types of notes will help you detect patterns in your symptoms, and can be especially useful if you ever decide to take legal action.

If there are significant amounts of fiberglass in your HVAC system, it may be helpful to inspect the system. If the system is located in the attic, and is immersed in fiberglass, this is a potentially dangerous mission. You will need complete safety gear.

Don a respirator, eye protection, gloves, long pants and long sleeves and go up into the attic. The minimum respiratory protection you should wear is a half-face respirator fitted with HEPA filters. The 3M 6000-series respirator costs around \$10 through industrial supply catalogs, and HEPA cartridges for this type of respirator are readily available. The respirator should fit snugly over the mouth and nose, with no leakage. Tyvek coveralls are ideal for rummaging around a fiberglass-laden attic, but in a pinch blue jeans and a hooded nylon windbreaker will do (hood up and tied).

Once in the attic, note the type of insulation used (usually a label from one of the insulation bags is stapled to a rafter) and inspect all duct work carefully. Look for gaps in between the duct sections, at corners and "Y"s. Pay close attention to areas of the ductwork which are immersed in insulation. If the ducts are immersed in blown-in insulation, a good indicator of a gap is missing insulation near the hole. The voids are caused when insulation is sucked into the duct and then distributed around the house.

Watch your step; disturb the insulation and ducts as little as possible. Disturbing the insulation just makes it airborne, and more dangerous. Disturbing the ducts increases the possibility that your actions will open a gap somewhere in the system.

If you find small gaps, you may be able to seal them with ordinary duct tape. In a proper duct installation, junctions in the ducts are sealed with tape. If yours are not, go ahead and tape up all of the joints you can.

If the gaps are large, there will likely be a lot of insulation missing. Large amounts of missing insulation virtually guarantees it is all over your house, and throughout the HVAC system. You may wish to check the air handler, the unit providing pressure for your HVAC system. The intake side of the air handler may literally be clogged with insulation. Much of the insulation will get caught in the filter which should be intercept air going into the handler unit. In some cases, the intake duct may be completely clogged with fibers.

If someone tells you no fibers can make it through the air handler, don't believe it. The smallest, most dangerous fibers can make it through. Furthermore, the air handler tends to chop the fibers which do pass through, making them smaller.

In any case, a plugged air handler intake forces the unit to work much harder, increases your power bills,

and will ultimately cause the motor to burn out prematurely.

If you can find no leaks in the system, be sure to securely close the entrance, so that insulation does not migrate down into the living space. Once out of the attic, immediately disrobe and shower. Don't continue working around the house with your contaminated clothes. Wash all contaminated clothes by themselves. Wipe out the washer with a disposable cloth afterward.

Another potential source of fibers in the home is the inside of the HVAC system. Your ducts may be lined with fiberglass on the inside. These ducts deteriorate over time, particularly in hot, humid climates. The deterioration compromises the binder holding down the fibers, allowing them to become airborne.

If you can still find no source of fibers in your home, consider recessed light fixtures and exhaust fans. Large attic fans can really stir up a lot of insulation.

During the time when you are investigating the possibility of fiberglass in your home, seek medical help whenever possible. It is almost impossible to build a legal case for health damage if you have never sought medical assistance for your maladies. Make sure you tell your doctor your suspicions about the house. Ask to see an occupational or other specialist. Be persistent, even if your doctor is unhelpful or incredulous.

When dealing with doctors, be firm and focused. Determine which are your most debilitating and persistent house-related symptoms. Don't bombard your doctor with an endless litany of seemingly unrelated health problems, and blame them on your house; your doctor will think you are crazy and send you to a psychiatrist. If your doctor becomes obstructionist, seek another one or find a suitable alternative health practitioner, who can treat you without powerful synthetic drugs.

The best advice for someone living in a fiberglass contaminated home is to get out. If children are present, it is imperative they be removed to a clean environment at once. Their immune systems are not fully developed and can be permanently damaged by fiberglass exposure.

If your house is contaminated with fiberglass, consider staying with friends, relatives, wherever you can, even if it means setting up a tent in the back yard. Take a trip to the coast or the mountains, anywhere with clean air. Your problems will seem less overwhelming if you are able to clear your head, breathe easy for a while, and carefully consider your next steps.

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