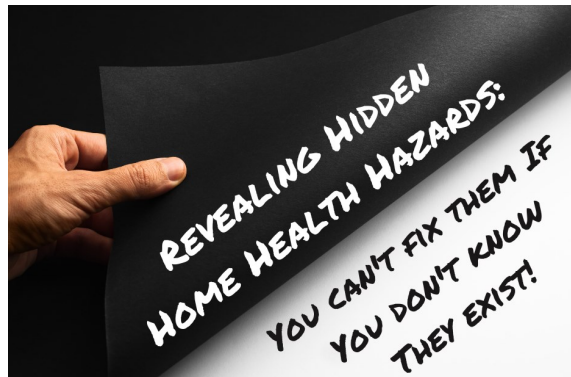


If we are fortunate, our homes are the safest of havens, a place to which we can retreat, rest, recharge, and share that comfort with the people we care about. Too often though, our homes have hazards that put our well-being at risk. Some threats are fairly obvious: cracks in the wall, holes in the roof, or frayed wires. Some dangers, however, are more inconspicuous and don't reveal themselves until the damage has been done. In the long run, uncovering these hidden hazards saves time and money, and protects everyone that lives in or visits that house.



Hidden Home Health Risks

[Slipping, Tripping, and Falling](#) - Anyone can take a tumble, but older people are especially at risk. Every year, people 65+ make more than 3 million trips to emergency rooms because of injuries related to falls. Some simple remedies include:

- ✓ Better lighting at the tops and bottoms of stairs, and making sure that all commonly-traveled paths are well lit
- ✓ Non-stick treads on stairs with smooth surfaces
- ✓ Handrails on both sides of stairs
- ✓ Get rid of throw rugs, secure large rugs with non-stick pads, and use low-pile, rubber-backed rugs in the bathroom
- ✓ Use non-stick mats or decals in tubs and showers
- ✓ Run electric cords along walls, not across the room
- ✓ Mop up spills right away
- ✓ Put frequently used items where they're easy to get to
- ✓ Use step stools (not chairs or other furniture) to access objects that are stored up high.

[Getting Zapped](#) - Make sure that you have GFCI (ground-fault circuit interrupter) outlets in your kitchen and bath. They're the ones with reset buttons, and they stop the flow of electricity if they detect variations in normal current. Be on the lookout for signs of hidden electrical problems, and call an electrician if you discover any: flickering, blinking, or dimming lights, blown fuses, warm or discolored wall plates, crackling, sizzling, or buzzing wall receptacles, small shocks when touching appliances or wall switches, or a burning odor from wall receptacles or switches.

[Dangerous Dining](#) - Food that can make you sick may not always look or smell different from food that's safe to eat. Make sure your refrigerator and freezer are keeping food at safe temperatures (below 37 and 0 degrees, respectively) and that door gaskets seal tightly.

[Getting Clobbered](#) - Heavy furniture tipping over sends almost 20,000 people a year to the ER. Use anti-tip kits to anchor furniture and mount TVs to the studs in the walls, not drywall anchors or toggles.

[Soggy Situations](#) - Leaky pipes behind walls can be causing damage long before you notice it. Blistering paint, warped walls, damaged wallpaper, cracked or buckling floor, loose tiles, and mold or mildew are signs you should call a plumber, find the leak, and prevent further structural damage or issues with mold.

[Keeping Warm](#) - Here in the Northland, keeping warm is a priority for much of the year, and we've got multiple options to do that. [Space heaters](#) can take the chill off, but nearly 1,700 house fires are caused by them every year. Never leave one unattended or near flammable materials. Before use, make sure the cord and plug are intact and don't plug them into extension cords.

Anything that uses combustion to produce heat (fireplaces, wood stoves, boilers, furnaces, or portable gas heaters) produces [Carbon Monoxide \(CO\)](#) - a colorless, odorless, and tasteless gas. Inhaling it can lead to CO poisoning - meaning that CO has built up in the bloodstream, replacing oxygen. This can lead to tissue damage or even death. [Fireplaces and woodstoves](#) can be the ultimate in coziness, but unseen creosote buildup can lead to chimney and house fires. Operating out of sight and often out of mind, [boilers and furnaces](#) can have unnoticed problems too. Check for a yellow or jumpy pilot light, and watch especially for cracked, rusting, and/or leaking flue pipes.

Protect yourself and your family from hidden heating dangers by installing CO detectors and having your heating system checked and cleaned by a professional at least once a season.

Taking care of ourselves can take a lot of support. We're here to help!
Ask a nurse or provider if you'd like to talk. 218-387-2330

Revealing Radon

[Radon](#) is one of the sneakiest of home health hazards! It's an invisible, odorless gas that drifts up from the soil. It's produced when naturally-occurring uranium and radium break down. Unfortunately, radon gas is common throughout Minnesota, with 2 in 5 homes having high radon levels.

As this gas escapes from the soil, it filters into buildings through cracks in concrete slabs, floor-wall joints, open sump pits, or through crawl spaces.

[Differences in the air pressure](#) between the home's interior and the underlying soil can pull the radon up through those pathways where it can then accumulate inside the building. Not only does Minnesota have high radon levels, but our cold weather necessitates that buildings be closed up for much of the year. This means that the radon is often trapped, increasing exposure for the people inside.

Radon in Household Water

The bad news - Radon can dissolve from rocks into the [groundwater](#) that is accessed via water wells. Showering, washing dishes, and doing laundry disturb the water and releases the radon into the air.

The good news - Except for a few isolated locations in Northern Minnesota, there isn't much elevated radon in our groundwater.

Radon Health Risks

Radon is the #1 cause of lung cancer in non-smokers, and the second most common cause of lung cancer in smokers. About 20,000 deaths a year are caused by breathing radon. The longer someone is exposed to radon - the greater the risk of cancer, and the combined risk of smoking and radon exposure is even higher.

Revealing Radon

The Minnesota Department of Health recommends that ALL homes be [tested for radon](#). The Cook County Environmental Health Department provides free short-term radon tests. Stop by and pick one up! The air inside homes should be:

- tested every 2-5 years.
- retested after any mitigation systems are installed.
- tested before and after any changes are made (finishing a basement, doing any work that increases energy efficiency, adding a new addition, adding a stove vent hood, adding/changing the central cooling or heating system, etc...)

Because radon in groundwater is generally not a problem in



Minnesota, having [well-water tested](#) is not usually necessary, unless the air radon values are high.

Mitigating Radon Exposure

Radon concentrations inside a building can be reduced by mitigation systems. Sealing cracks and installing a fan and pipe that vents the gas above the edge of the roof, away from windows, are two possible interventions. [Licensed radon mitigation specialists](#) can help you determine which system would work best with your foundation type.

Radon can be reduced in water by:

- Aeration - mixing it with air and then venting that air away from the water before use, or
- Granular Activated Charcoal - filtering the water through GAC causes the radon to attach to the charcoal. Depending on radon levels, GAC may require special handling for disposal.

Healthy Housing Initiative

Information from Cook County Public Health

While all people deserve to live in a safe and healthy home, not everyone has that opportunity. Some home environments are hazardous and can cause significant illness, injury, or death to those who live there. Yet, some household hazards (such as fall risks, mold, radon, pests, or lead) are preventable. By working with homeowners and renters, trained public health staff can offer evidence-based healthy housing assessments to identify housing-based health threats. They can also offer education and resources to help correct the identified hazards in many circumstances.

Living in a safe and healthy home increases mental well-being, both for the individuals directly impacted, and for the community. The Cook County Public Health Department is hoping to engage multiple perspectives from the community as we build our capacity to address the link between health and housing in Cook County. We invite you to be a part of that group, to advise us in public health so that we can develop a successful, equitable healthy housing program that best meets the needs of those most impacted by housing instability and housing-based health threats. If you are interested in joining the Healthy Housing Network or would like more information on getting a healthy housing assessment, contact Andrea Orest, Public Health Educator, at andrea.orest@co.cook.mn.us or 218-220-5536.