

## - Hazardous substances

## READER'S DIGEST

## HEALTH



# Hazards In Your Home

*How to combat health risks lurking in your house*

BY *Susannah Hickling*

## MOULD

This fungus often appears where there is damp, condensation and a lack of ventilation, such as on windows, walls and behind cupboards. Not only do mouldy walls and grouting look horrible, they're also a threat to health, exacerbating asthma and causing bronchitis and other breathing problems, plus eye,

nose and throat irritation. Leave windows open whenever possible, especially in bathrooms, where an extractor fan will also help. Ideally, dry clothes outdoors. Keep buildings and gutters maintained and tackle leaks promptly.

## RATS AND MICE

Rodents carry a host of bacteria and viruses. These include salmonella, the respiratory infection hantavirus (which you can catch by breathing in dust from droppings) and LCMV, a kind of meningitis. They're not common, but who wants to live in a home contaminated with rat or mice droppings or urine anyway? Discourage rodents by keeping surfaces free from food, cleaning regularly and blocking any possible access points. Put down traps as soon as you see signs of activity – droppings are a giveaway.

## BEDBUGS

A plague of these gross insects caused a frenzy in France last year, thanks to warm weather and more people travelling. These little creatures leave red, itchy lumps when they feed off you in the night. Other tell-tale signs are bugs in the tags, seams or piping of your mattress and brown spots – bedbug droppings – on your bedding. Bedbugs can sometimes be found in clothes, curtains and carpets, too.

Wash anything you can that's

ILLUSTRATIONS: SHUTTERSTOCK

## Health

affected on a hot wash, vacuum your bed and the area around it every day, and keep a closed, plastic cover on your mattress for a year.

### CARBON MONOXIDE

Fires, wood-burners, gas boilers and cookers can produce invisible, odourless but lethal carbon monoxide if they are faulty, badly installed or poorly maintained. Symptoms to be alert to include headache, feeling sick or weak, chest pain or shortness of breath. If you think you're affected, leave the house and get medical help. Make sure gas appliances are serviced regularly, have chimneys and flues swept and install a carbon monoxide monitor in any room where the gas could be generated.

### SHOES INDOORS

Whatever etiquette might dictate, taking outdoor shoes off is a hygienic option when you enter a home. A study by microbiologist Professor Charles Gerba of the University of Arizona found coliform bacteria from faecal material on the outside

of 96 per cent of outdoor shoes examined. One species of coliform, *E. coli*, can cause stomach bugs and urinary tract infections. Keeping floors clean will also reduce the risk.



**WHATEVER ETIQUETTE MIGHT DICTATE, TAKING OUTDOOR SHOES OFF IS A HYGIENIC OPTION WHEN YOU ENTER A HOME**

### SHOWER HEADS

Think catching Legionnaires' disease from your shower sounds far-fetched? It's not impossible if it's not used regularly. To keep *Legionella* bacteria at bay, store hot water at 16°C or higher and allow the shower to run for a few minutes before stepping in if you haven't used it for a while. Descal your shower head every few months to prevent bacteria, viruses and microorganisms.

