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## Healing the home

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**BY BETH D'ADDONO**  
For the Star-Ledger

As if we don't have enough to worry about, tracking down trans fats, avoiding dangerous over-the-counter drugs and monitoring our kid's page on myspace.com, now our own homes might be hazardous to our health.

"There are so many toxins in our homes that are linked to illnesses," says Lisa Beres, a California interior designer whose personal health crisis inspired her to start Green Nest, a company specializing in environmentally sound products, including air purifiers, water filters and organic linens. In her own case, toxins in textiles, furnishings and building materials in her new home gave her a case of chronic fatigue syndrome, combined with hormonal imbalances, that totally immobilized her. When traditional doctors couldn't diagnose the problem she started exploring alternative medicine and doing research on her own. "I found out that paint, particle board cabinetry, carpeting and upholstery could outgas dangerous toxins like formaldehyde into the air."

As she gradually made changes, her health dramatically improved. Of course, Beres acknowledges that not everybody has the same level of sensitivity to environmental factors; in fact her husband had no health problems at all, despite living in the same home.

Pesticides, something most of us keep out of the way on a shelf in the garage, are another offender. They can enter our home by being tracked in from the outdoors, or, according to Debbie Foster, owner of Organic Nest in Morristown, as residue on cotton textiles. Foster, who sells eco-friendly sheets, clothing, bedding and mattresses, believes babies and small children are especially vulnerable.

According to the National Cotton Council, however, cotton textiles go through so many processing steps that the pesticides that protect the growing plant have dissipated by the time they become clothing or bedding. "From a residue-free standpoint, there is absolutely no difference between conventionally grown and organically grown cotton," says Phil Wakelyn, senior scientist for the National Cotton Council. "It's the consumer that drives the product, and in this case, it's a lifestyle decision."

If you're like most people, the very notion of tracking down toxins in your home fills you with dread. What are you supposed to do, rip up the rugs, throw out your furniture and deep six your mattresses? Who can afford to do that?

"One of the things that public health folks are reluctant to do is tell the public about a health risk if there's nothing they can do about it," said Brenda Afzal, a community health specialist with the Environmental Health Education Center at University of Maryland School of Nursing. "I try to raise awareness, give people information and just get people to think about the reasons they make purchasing decisions. It's impossible to reach a completely non-toxic level, but we can choose less toxic alternatives."

For Ellen Kranefuss, 45, who lives in Madison with her husband, Jack, and their daughters Caroline, 8 and Olivia, 6, awareness of environmental issues within her home came gradually.

"I think of it as taking baby steps," she said. "It's an evolutionary process. The more you become aware of the products you're purchasing, the more you read, then you start to feel that you can make a difference. So many times we feel powerless in our lives. But in this area, in our home, we can have an impact."

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Once she'd made the switch to buying organic milk, fruits and vegetables, she started thinking about other products. "It's all about consumption. If we consume less things that need plastic and packaging, we burn less fossil fuel and we emit less CO2 into the air, which we all know is creating all the nasty problems that go along with the greenhouse effect." Making green choices for the home has the extra benefit of reducing toxins, both inside the home, and in the greater global landscape.

Cleaning products were the first order of the day. Many store-bought cleaning products emit toxins and leave unhealthy chemical residues behind. "The message we get from commercials is that if we don't buy antibacterial cleaning products that make our house smell better, we're not good parents," said Afzal. "Recent science tells us that we don't need to be germ free, in fact it's a bit of a problem if children aren't exposed to a normal range of germs. Good old fashioned soap and water works the best." Instead of spraying a chemical in the air, follow the EPA's recommendation to "Eliminate or control the source of the pollution and dilute and exhaust the pollutants through outdoor air ventilation." In other words, open a window.

Once she switched to green products to clean her home, including forgoing a chemical cleaner for a simple solution of vinegar and water to clean glass surfaces, Kranefuss and her husband made a commitment to become better recyclers, even involving their daughters in the process. "Our garbage is truly just garbage. We separate every can, every scrap of paper, and every single piece of plastic. Cutting down our garbage by half of one large trash bag per week saves at least 1,100 pounds of CO2 emissions per year. That really adds up."

Other changes included replacing incandescent bulbs with energy-efficient compact fluorescents. Although they cost more initially, they save money in the long run by using only one-quarter the energy of an ordinary bulb and lasting 8-12 times longer. One of these bulbs replacing an incandescent can cut CO2 emissions by 822 pounds in five years.

Running the dishwasher only when full, using a low-flow showerhead and washing clothes in cold or warm water only were other measures the family instituted. They also installed a carbon water filter for the household water supply, eliminating the need to purchase bottled water.

"For us, it's as much about the health of the planet as our own health," she said. "We counted it up, and by making 12 different changes, we reduced CO2 emissions by something like 25,000 pounds a year. And that's just our one house."

Being more thoughtful about consumption and aware of what products they bring into the home has had a positive affect on the entire family, she said. "We really try to get the girls to think about want versus need. Energy is used to make everything, and we need to think about that."

When it was time to buy big beds for the girls, she invested in a mattress made from natural and organic materials, purchased from Foster's shop, Organic Nest. "I didn't like the idea that the sheets we were sleeping on were made from cotton treated with pesticides," she said. Mattresses are typically stuffed with polyurethane foam and other materials that may have been treated with flame-retardants and covered with material treated to resist water, stains and wrinkles. These chemicals can contribute indoor air pollution. And while the toxins from most products dissipate in time, especially with exposure to sunlight, mattresses can release gaseous chemicals for years.

"Children spend eight to 10 hours a day sleeping in their beds," said Foster, who sells only natural, organic, fair-trade and sustainable products.

For Foster, it's important that the vendors with whom she works practice fair trade, which refers to an equitable and fair partnership between North American marketers and producers in other parts of the world. It aims to guarantee a living wage for those producers and support environmentally responsible practices, healthy and safe working conditions and no abuse of child labor.

"We have choices," she says.

And while she admits that her own sons didn't sleep on organic crib mattresses -- "I didn't know about them!" -- the idea is to make the most informed choices when you are ready to make a purchase. Buying organic textiles, just like buying organic food, costs more. A twin size mattress at Organic Nest costs somewhere around \$1,500, a set of sheets \$150, more on the par with a luxury mattress or designer sheets sold at a high-end department store than at a

discount chain.

"The cost can be a factor. But you can pick and choose what's important to you. It can seem monumental," said Kranefuss. "For me, I just started with the areas of the home that I thought changes would have the most impact, like with laundry or cleaning products. Then it moved on from there. Now, when we do something, whether it's a construction project, painting the bedroom or buying items for the home, we think about buying products that don't hurt us or the Earth. It sounds trite, but I truly believe we're making a difference."

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