

Is Your Furniture Making You Sick?

Toxins can hide in bookcases, shower curtains, and old clocks. Scary, but protecting yourself is simple.

An antique clock topples in a Southold, New York, living room, and the pendulum cracks, soaking the carpet with two cups of liquid mercury—a potent neurotoxin.

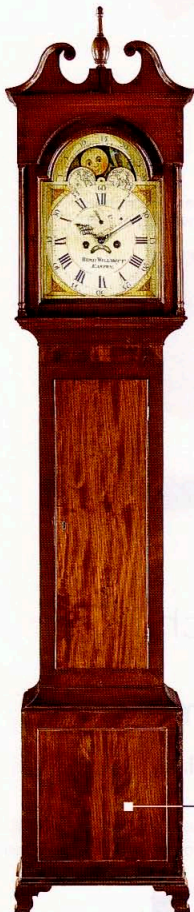
Inside 120 Cape Cod homes, scientists find more than 60 chemicals that interfere with hormones and may be linked to behavioral problems, obesity, diabetes, and cancer. The hormone disruptors are in house dust and in the air and include chemicals in plastics and detergents. A major source is the furniture. You may know to test vintage furniture for lead paint, but that's not the only place toxins hide.

■ ANTIQUE CLOCKS, MIRRORS, BAROMETERS, THERMOMETERS, AND LAMP

Hidden toxin: Mercury, used to weight clock pendulums and lamp bases, to provide a reflective surface behind the glass of old mirrors, and to indicate pressure and temperature changes in barometers and thermometers.

Health threat: Inhaled mercury vapors, which are odorless, can cause shortness of breath, chest pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and high blood pressure. Long-term exposure to even low levels can cause muscle tremors, insomnia, irritability, headaches, and memory loss.

What to do: If mercury spills, open windows, turn off fans and heaters in the room, and shut the door. If it's a small amount—less than a pea—and on a hard nonporous surface, put on old clothes and shoes (remove your jewelry so mercury can't adhere to it), wear disposable rubber gloves,



and use an eyedropper to suck up droplets one by one. Place in a ziplock bag, then double-bag—and call your local health department about how to dispose of it and the clothes.

For large or hard-to-clean spills, find an environmental or hazardous materials contractor or engineer in the yellow pages. "Never sweep mercury with a broom—the mercury will adhere to broom bristles and dust pan surfaces and spread every time you use them again," warns Wanda Lizak Welles, PhD, chief of hazardous substances events surveillance for the New York State Department of Health. Vacuuming is even worse. "As the vacuum cleaner motor warms up, you'll shoot mercury vapor into the air with the machine's exhaust." For detailed cleanup instructions, go to www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/chemicals.

■ SHOWER CURTAIN LINERS, PLASTIC TABLECLOTHS, OTHER SOFT, FLEXIBLE PLASTICS

Hidden toxin: Phthalates, the soft, flexible plasticizers found in everything from shower curtains and tablecloths to the coverings on some beanbag chairs.

Health threat: Studies suggest that phthalates are hormone disruptors. "The biggest concern is exposure for pregnant women," says Ruthann

Time bomb: Rudel, senior environmental toxicologist at the Silent Spring Institute in Newton, Massachusetts. "In one study, there was a relationship between a mom's phthalate levels and reproductive development in boys. Other studies have found a link between exposure

and low sperm quality in men." **What to do:** "Avoid them," Rudel says. "If something has that plasticky, new-car smell, it probably contains phthalates. If you can smell it, you're breathing it in. If you buy something and discover it has this smell, open the windows to air out your home and take the product outside. Let it sit there until the smell goes away. Sunlight breaks down chemicals faster."

Wash permanent-press fabrics before you use them to reduce chemicals.

■ PRESSED-WOOD FURNITURE AND PERMANENT-PRESS FABRICS

Hidden toxin: Formaldehyde, found in the adhesives in particleboard, plywood, and medium-density fiberboard (MDF). Also in the finish of permanent-press fabrics.

Health threat: A known human carcinogen, formaldehyde is associated with nasal and brain cancers and possibly leukemia. Immediate reactions include eye irritation, skin and respiratory allergies, asthma, nausea, coughing, chest tightness, and wheezing.

What to do: Choose pressed-wood products made with phenol formaldehyde (PF) resin or methylene diisocyanate (MDI) resin—these emit less formaldehyde. A veneer or water-resistant coating will reduce emissions; pressed-wood with a stamp from the Composite Panel Association (CPA) or Hardwood Plywood and Veneer Association (HPVA) will release less vapor. Wash permanent-press fabrics first—this can reduce formaldehyde emissions by up to 60 percent. Some experts recommend keeping pressed-wood furniture out of kids' rooms to lower their asthma risk. "If it smells," Rudel says, "don't buy it." —S.H.