

# The Unhealthy Side of Household Dust

We clean your home as if it were our own. <sup>SM</sup>

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*Common household dust isn't as innocent as you may think. Surprisingly, some tiny, airborne components of dust are counterproductive to staying healthy. The health benefits are just another good reason to control dust in your home.*

Dusting is one of those chores we tend to put off until it becomes absolutely necessary, especially if housecleaning isn't your forte. Some people can ignore a thin layer (or a thick one) of **dust** because dusting just seems tedious, and it seems to just come right back. The fact is, however, dust shouldn't be ignored because, as unassuming as simple dust can be, it can have negative effects on our health!

Household dust is made up of millions of different components. Three of the most common ones are dead skin, hair and nail cells; dried feces and corpses of dust mites (how nice!), and fibers shed from clothing, carpeting, and furniture.



*It's no surprise that dust can be found everywhere in our homes. But it is surprising what can be found in common, household dust.*

Also mixed into your dust is **pollen**, **mold**, **fungi**, **lichen**, plant and vegetable matter, insect parts, heavy **hydrocarbon** waste from your oil or gas heater, food waste, paper fiber, pet **dander**, and more. The components of dust are endless; any material—vegetable, animal, or mineral—that is tiny enough to be easily suspended in the air is part of common, everyday, ordinary dust.

When we stop to analyze what is in the dust we breathe and see settling throughout our homes, sometimes it is quite surprising to learn what it is made of. While the number one ingredient in house dust is human and animal skin cells, a number of different chemical compounds are generally always present, too.

In a 2005 study of dust samples from 70 homes nationwide, six classes of chemicals were found in every sample. Those chemicals are either found in or used to make everything from home electronics and stain-resistant fabrics to PVC shower curtains, children's toys and nonstick cookware. Nearly every sample contained common plastic additives known as phthalates used to make plastics soft and shampoos fragrant. Also found were pesticides including DDT—banned in the 1970s yet still the single most-detected pesticide in our food and bodies. (The report of this study, *Sick of Dust*, can be found in the White Glove Documents Library.)

Flame retardants, too, were found in the 2005 dust study. Who would think little particles of flame retardants from so many of our home furnishing are floating in the air? Your furniture, mattresses, electronic equipment, foam-backed carpeting, and computers are all doused in flame retardants, which help slow the spread of fire.

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While this may sound like a good thing (and for the most part it is), unfortunately the chemicals found in flame retardants **off-gas** forming microscopic particles that show up in large numbers in house dust. The principal chemical in flame retardants is *polybrominated diphenyl ether* (**PBDE**), which is a suspected carcinogen and estrogen disrupter. Studies have revealed that PBDE are present in the blood streams of most animals and nearly all Americans, Canadians, and Europeans, including newborns.

So, how do PBDEs and other chemicals in flame retardants get into our bloodstream? One likely answer is through our household dust. We breathe it in and some of us (especially small children who love to play on floors and put things into their mouths) ingest them directly.

The next time you lie in bed and notice that grayish layer on your nightstand, think of the many other things in dust besides chemicals. There's probably minute particles of lead from lead paint that has disintegrated over time, especially if you live in an older home.

Perhaps, most surprising is the presence of **asbestos** in dust. Asbestos was the wonder material used to build millions of houses, schools and office buildings until the public became aware of its cancer-causing ability in the 1970s. It was in more than 30 categories of products. The list includes appliances, such as clothes dryers, dishwashers, ovens, refrigerators and electric heaters.

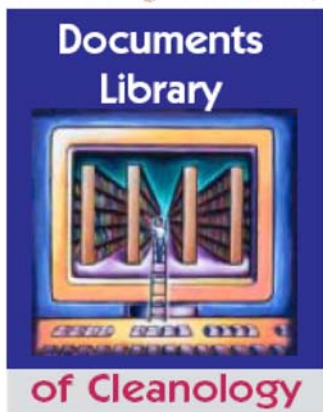
Yes, asbestos is still used today. Although the material was heavily regulated in the 1970s, it was never banned and is in products ranging from car brakes to plaster and spackling compounds, vinyl floor tiles, ceiling panels, asphalt shingles, wallboard, caulking and several kinds of insulation used in homes, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

If you are an **allergy** sufferer, you are probably already well aware of how dust can trigger your allergies. But you do not need to be allergic to dust mites to have a good sneezing fit from a dusty home. Mold spores and other allergens like fungi also live in dust and trip up allergy sufferers.

So, yes, that layer of dust sitting atop your bookshelves and embedding itself in your carpets isn't just an aesthetic issue. There really are genuine health reasons to dust frequently. By regularly removing the dust from our homes, we decrease our exposure to the chemicals and allergens that live within it. ■

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Cleaning Academy**



Readers may also be interested in the publication *Sick of Dust--Chemicals of Common Products--A Needless Health Risk in Our Homes*, which is also in the White Glove Documents Library. This publication, by the Clean Production Action organization, is the findings of the 2005 study of household dust mentioned on page one. The report is written in easy-to-understand language and has interested charts and diagrams that illustrate the chemicals found throughout our home that can be found in household dust.

Learn more about the Clean Production Action on their Website, [www.CleanProductionAction.org](http://www.CleanProductionAction.org).