Based on statistics from the National Association of Realtors, 5.34 million people bought existing homes in 2018. Homes built before 1990 fall into the "older" category, and those built before 1920 qualify as "vintage."

Older houses often have perks like wood floors and established neighborhoods, but they also have increased risks of potential environmental hazards. Four of the most common are asbestos, radon, lead paint and mold. It's hugely important to understand the effects of environmental hazards, so let's take a look at what first time buyers and others need to be aware of.

Asbestos

A natural mineral and building material prized for its fire-resistance and durability, asbestos was widely used before 1980. Then, it fell out of favor because of its health risks and effects of environmental hazards, but still ended up in homes. Common sources include insulation, floor and ceiling tiles, adhesives, and textured wall and ceiling paint.

The material is not usually dangerous if it's in good condition or sealed, but decay and renovations can cause it to come apart and release harmful particles into the air. The fibers can embed themselves in the bodies of people who inhale them and cause serious illnesses, the most serious being a fatal cancer called mesothelioma. The fibers can also cause other types of cancer or an inflammation-related condition known as asbestosis.

Black Mold

Toxic mold grows outside in plant debris or soil but can also grow inside, especially in wet or humid places. It usually develops in unseen locations and feeds on organic sources like carpet and drywall, where it breaks off and enters the air.

People who breathe it experience symptoms similar to colds or allergies, but conditions like chronic fatigue and headaches may also develop. When people are allergic to mold, they may develop nausea, vomiting, and bleeding in the lungs or nose. Severe cases may affect the nervous system or cause temporary memory loss — a major effect of environmental hazards at home.

Mold can be expensive and difficult to remove. Moist spaces like basements and crawlspaces or bathrooms and kitchens are likely spots. Homeowners can hire a trained professional to test for mold or use a do-it-yourself kit from the hardware store. People with

mold-related illnesses usually get better when they spend time in a clean environment.

Lead Paint

The federal government banned lead-containing paint in 1978 and now requires sellers to disclose its presence in homes built before then. It is most dangerous when it is flaking or chipping from the old surface but doesn't pose a serious risk when it is in good condition. Because sanding creates dust and airborne particles, it should always be removed by stripping. Homes built before 1982 also have lead pipes, and replacement can cost $5,000 or more.

Reactions to the paint, usually from swallowing, are usually mild but can cause learning disabilities or behavioral problems in children. At higher levels or over long periods of time, lead can cause brain damage in children. It can also contribute to kidney and nervous system conditions in children and adults.

Radon

This natural gas rises from the ground through cracks or holes in the foundation of buildings. Linked to cancer in both smokers and non-smokers, it is the leading cause of lung cancer in people who don't smoke. It causes around 21,000 deaths every year, and researchers say children may be more susceptible than adults.

The federal government recommends specific levels, but regulations differ in each state. Specialists recommend keeping levels as close as possible to zero as possible and checking every two to three years to make sure it stays that way. An interactive map shows potential levels in each state.

The responsibility of managing environmental issues falls under the jurisdiction of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), an organization that has undergone significant changes since 2016. Besides providing resources and administering safety laws, the EPA monitors substances that make private residences or public buildings unsafe. Their website has resources on everything from safe drinking water to disposal of hazardous waste, and it includes detailed guides for dealing with common dangers.

Home inspectors look at age, location and type of construction when they examine a home for environmental hazards. A good inspection can make a home safer and prevent expensive surprises in the future. The American Society of Home Inspectors and The International

Society of Certified Home Inspectors license inspectors and provide registries of qualified professionals.