

allergy

NEWSLETTER

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Action Against Allergy

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MY HOUSE SAVED MY CHILDREN'S LIVES!

Virginia Salares' children were described by their doctor as the most allergic and hypersensitive kids she had ever seen in all her years of practice. Not finding success with conventional approaches, Virginia set out to find a new way to help her children. Her journey would lead to a radical re-think of the way houses are built and maintained across the world.

A typical night in the early eighties went something like this – I'd get up in the middle of the night with Aileen, our older daughter, coughing and vomiting in her bed. Barely back to my bed, I would be roused by our younger daughter, Rachel, sitting in her bed with coughing fits. I don't ever remember having a full night's sleep. Things were so bad at one point that it became a weekly occurrence for my husband, Rafael, and I to carry Aileen and Rachel to the A&E or doctors' for asthma, eczema, bronchitis, and recurrent pneumonia. By the time Rachel was 4 and Aileen was 8, I was also pregnant with our son and had my own allergies to pollen in the spring. It would have been easy to despair, but I knew I had to help them and myself."

Virginia's daughters were 'atopic' children, meaning they were overly sensitive to allergens in their environment. Their levels of antibodies involved in allergic reactions, were exceedingly high (21,000 and 7,000) compared to non-atopic children of the same age (several hundreds). Furthermore, they were also very sensitive to almost everything you'd find in a typical household, such as carpet, paint, and MDF furniture.



"The doctors had told us 'they'd grow out of it' but it was getting worse and the medication they prescribed only treated the symptoms, not the cause. For example, we tried a course of steroids to make the rash go away, but as soon as the medication stopped, the rash would come back worse than ever. The symptoms were only being masked, rather than addressed."

With a doctorate in chemistry, Virginia approached her children's problems the same way she would in a laboratory setting, except that this was a bigger challenge. It was not an academic exercise; it involved Aileen and Rachel's life and health.

"At the time, we were living in an old house. It was damp and it had a basement, which was an issue as below ground areas allow moisture to enter a house, which

led to mould, and triggered our daughter's allergic reactions."

Although Virginia and her husband could have fixed some of the problems in the house, they didn't feel confident that they could improve the indoor environment sufficiently.

Building from scratch

"We could have made some changes, but we wanted the indoor air quality to be as good as it could be," explains Virginia. "This meant we needed to build a new home from scratch."

Virginia began to talk to local builders about building a house with specific requirements. She got nowhere until she met with world-renowned housing expert Oliver Drerup, who was already in the process of building the first house for an individual with special needs. This house not only had all the energy-efficient features and ample ventilation but was also built with materials that caused no adverse reactions to the owner and were known to have no poisonous components or harmful emissions.

"Oliver's prototype healthy house was fairly luxurious but we had a limited budget and just wanted the healthy housing essentials: the best indoor air quality and a high quality outer shell. Energy efficiency was secondary, but one of the best ways to address indoor health problems is to increase their home's energy efficiency."

Virginia and Rafael's new house was completed in November 1984. Every material in its construction was carefully considered. Its exterior resembled a modern bungalow with stucco finish and

its interior featured ceramic floors, unpainted plaster walls and carpentry made with solid wood. The building also featured a heat recovery ventilator that ensured a continuous supply of healthy, fresh air to every room in the house and helped maintain optimum humidity levels.

Virginia explains, "The heat recovery ventilator acts as the house's 'lungs' and means that we could keep windows closed all day and still get fresh air in every room of the house. The house air is continuously filtered. This is a contrast to conventional housing, where open windows or ventilation slots not only let in fresh air but also cold drafts, dust, dirt, a lot of noise and, sometimes, burglars."

Humidity levels

"The mechanical ventilation also controlled humidity levels which is crucial when creating a healthy indoor environment. High humidity levels can lead to the growth of moulds and encourages the proliferation of house mites."

Virginia and her family moved to their new home the following month. For the children, the effect was remarkable. "The children were able to sleep through the night, they had less coughs and colds, our visits to the A&E stopped and we only had to go to the doctors for check-ups.

"The house was built and the choice of materials inside the house removed the triggers that were causing them to be sick. Our new house meant the children didn't have to fight to live."

"The majority of people spend a great deal of their time indoors and when there

continued over

are health problems, as in my family, the proportion of time spent indoors is even higher. As Rachel and Aileen no longer had to battle against indoor air pollutants in the home, the effects of unavoidable outdoor containments, such as pollen, were so much less as their immune systems had time to recuperate. For example, Rachel was mostly on home schooling for four years to give her body a chance to get stronger, but on the days when she went to school, she experienced fewer problems than before to common air pollutants, such as dust, perfume and paint."

A year after the family had been living in their new house Virginia got their antibody levels tested again. "There was dramatic reduction, which meant Aileen and Rachel's bodies were getting less hyper-reactive," comments Virginia.

"It was the first case, as far as I'm aware, of an improvement in the home environment having a proven marked effect on a marker in the blood for allergy."

Research programme

In 1991 the Government of Canada commissioned a five-year research programme to research ways of accommodating the housing needs of the environmentally hypersensitive and how to build houses with improved indoor air quality. The benchmark for the indoor air quality was its suitability to people who were disabled by normal environments.

With Virginia's unique personal experience with her own family and her training as a chemist, she was hired by the Government of Canada to conduct the

study. Virginia comments, "I was very excited by the opportunity. I knew that if we could make a breakthrough I'd be able to help thousands of other children like Rachel and Aileen and give peace of mind to thousands more parents."

During the process of the study, it became apparent that the indoor requirements for the environmentally hyper sensitive are also the ideal for the population.

Virginia comments, "Most people suffer from indoor air pollutants albeit to different extremes. For example, some people may suffer from bad indoor air quality by feeling tired or unwell, but they can't put their finger on why."

"A house should be healthy even if the occupants don't have allergies. A young couple would not know whether their as yet unborn child will have allergies or not, but they can plan on having a supportive environment that would nurture their child. Also, as people get older, their immune system gets weaker - pensioners and also pregnant women are at most risk. A well-built house is insurance from infancy to 'old age' and can only help the property's next occupants."

Virginia's research also highlighted the components, which affect indoor air quality. Instead of guessing, Virginia and her team were able to pinpoint the triggers and could therefore guide builders how to make the houses better for occupants. As a result of her work and other international research, the Super E house was developed.

Virginia comments, "Super E is a state of the art, energy efficient healthy house which was developed by the Government of Canada and is now being built across

the world, including the UK, to help people with allergies and asthma address their home environment.”

“Like the house that we built for our daughters, Super E technology focuses on improving the quality of indoor quality and ensuring the property is highly energy efficient.”

“Healthy housing is particularly relevant in the UK where the humid climate creates a perfect breeding ground for mould spores, which may be one of the reasons asthma rates have been soaring in recent years.”

Twenty-five years later, Virginia’s daughters have grown up to live full and productive lives.

“For them to be working in the real world is remarkable because when they were young with their health problems, I was not sure if they would be able to go to university. There is no doubt in my mind that their lives would have turned out very differently if we hadn’t provided them with the right indoor environment.”

Revolution

Virginia’s research into healthy housing has also led to a revolution in the way homes are constructed across the world. The number of healthy Super E homes has grown to over 10,000 in Canada and UK’s



500th Super E home was completed last month. (See picture.)

“What has been the most rewarding for me is learning about children across the world whose lives have transformed since living in a Super E home. For example, in Kent there is six-year-old Ella who as a toddler was so ill with asthma that she could barely break into a run without needing treatment from a nebuliser. Her severe attacks used to terrify her mother.

“Three years ago Ella moved with her mother, Beverley, and her three older siblings, to a Super E home, which eliminates mould spores, a key asthma trigger, by being properly ventilated.

“In the absence of spores and other allergens, her mother reports that they’ve only had to use Ella’s nebuliser once in the three years since they moved. The Super E home is also enabling Ella to run around and she even recently joined the school football team!”

Virginia still lives with her husband Rafael in the original healthy house in Canada and travels the world educating people about the importance of indoor air quality.

“We would never sell our healthy house. Aside from the emotional attachments we have for it because of the way it helped our daughters, it’s extremely comfortable to live in and plays an important role in keeping us healthy. Incidentally, it has never been painted and still looks like it was built yesterday.”

For more information on Super E visit www.super-e.com or call 00-800-3999-9969. About a dozen UK building companies build Super E Homes.