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KEEPING FOOD SCRAPS INDOORS COULD BE BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH

Putting food scraps in one trash bin and everything else in another may, according to the February issue of *Applied and Environmental Microbiology*, be good for the environment, but it could be bad for your health.

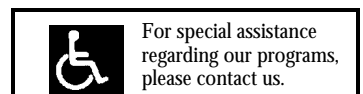
American and Dutch researchers reported that bacteria from the food scraps, also called organic waste, drifts around the house. This raises the toxin levels in the other rooms. According to Serena Gordon, "It's the same as if you'd left old eggshells and orange peels sitting on the coffee table."

Toxins from organic waste have been linked to increased symptoms among asthmatics and others with respiratory disease, according to the researchers.

For the study, researchers from the University of Iowa and Wageningen University in the Netherlands collected dust samples from the kitchens and living rooms of 99 homes in the Netherlands. Half of the homes had separate waste bins for organic and nonorganic trash inside their homes. Most residents emptied their trash bins at least twice a week.

"We found that levels of fungal and bacterial toxins in the dust of living rooms were 1.5 to 3.4 times increased in houses with organic waste indoors," says Inge Wouters, a co-author of the study and a member of the environmental and occupational health group at Wageningen University. Homes with carpeting fared even worse. The combined effect of organic waste and carpet created up to a 840-fold higher level of contaminants, compared to houses without an organic bin and a smooth floor.

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In Europe, it has become more and more common to separate the organic and nonorganic waste. In the United States it's done infrequently. Americans who separate food scraps from their other trash generally do so to create compost for their gardens. Organic waste includes fruit, vegetables, and other food scraps. Nonorganic waste includes all other garbage produced in the home.

Interestingly, mixing organic and nonorganic trash seems to negate the problem. The researchers found no difference in the bacteria level between homes that mixed their trash and homes that kept only nonorganic trash inside. Why this occurs is unclear at this time. It might be that people who mix their garbage empty their trash containers more often, or that the other materials in the trash absorb the fluids and slow down the growth of bacteria and fungi.

If you want to separate your food scraps from the rest of your trash, Wouters recommends storing the organic waste outdoors, or emptying the organic waste bin several times a day. People with chronic health problems might consider changing their trash collection methods.

Source: Christine Bruhn email, February 25, 2000

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