

Impact of Housing on Health in Simcoe Muskoka

Why is housing a health issue?

Shelter is one of the most fundamental requirements for good health. Inadequate housing and homelessness leads to increased illness and premature death from infectious, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, mental illness and fatal injuries.²

Housing directly affects health outcomes of individuals and families, enhances their ability to access educational and employment opportunities and ensures the opportunity to participate in the social and economic fabric of the community.³ Living in substandard housing can lead to unhealthy means of coping as a result of the stress created by poor living conditions. High housing costs reduces accessibility to resources, such as food, employment and income, which are needed to support good health.³

The cost of housing

Housing is considered affordable if it costs less than 30% of before-tax household income. This leaves enough money left over to pay for other necessities such as, food, clothing, transportation, daycare, dental care and internet.¹

Housing needs are being felt by many within Simcoe and Muskoka. According to the 2011 National Household Survey⁴:

Simcoe County

- 47% of renters spend 30% or more of their household total income on rent.
- 22% of home owners spend 30% or more on shelter costs.

District of Muskoka

- 47% of renters spend 30% or more of their household total income on rent.
- 20% of home owners spend 30% or more on shelter costs.

Based on the Nutritious Food Basket Survey results for Simcoe Muskoka combined:

- A family of 4 on Ontario Works will spend 55% of their income on rent.
- A family of 4 with one full-time minimum wage earner will spend 42% of their income on rent.
- A single person on Ontario Works will spend 94% of their income on rent.¹



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Where you live can impact health

Affordable and suitable housing makes a difference in the health of individuals and families; but where people live can impact their health as well.

- People who live in neighbourhoods where incomes are lower and who have less education are more likely to smoke, be overweight, and report poorer mental health.⁵
- People benefit from living in neighbourhoods made up of a mix of residential, commercial and business activities, with housing that facilitates social interactions and that makes walking from home to work and shopping easy. These neighbourhoods have lower levels of obesity and greater social contact and do better at supporting the positive social behaviour of young people.⁶
- Over and above individual and family-level influences, a person's neighbourhood income level in childhood can profoundly affect his or her health, performance in school and achievement in later life.⁷

Environmental health in the home

There are many factors within a home that can impact the health of those living in it. Housing that is maintained according to applicable standards can help mitigate exposure to environmental health risks.

Environmental health risks can occur due to various circumstances and sources. For example, poor building design or inadequate maintenance and ventilation can lead to poor indoor air quality, pests and structural issues; the age of the home can impact the types of materials used in its construction, such as lead; natural hazards such as radon can be present; occupant activities (i.e. smoking) and the use of some consumer products can impact the health of residents within a home.

Common environmental health risks that are reported to the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit

- **Mould** – While not all moulds are harmful to human health, the presence of mould within a home indicates a structural issue creating increased moisture, increased condensation from poor ventilation or a plumbing leak and needs to be addressed. Factors that increase the risk of reaction to moulds include: susceptibility of the individual (babies, asthmatics and persons with poor immune systems are at higher risk) and level of exposure. Potential health risks from mould include allergic reactions, respiratory and flu-like symptoms.
- **Pests and Rodents** – The presence of pests such as bed bugs, cockroaches or rodents in a home may indicate points of entry within the home's structure, or possible contributing sanitation issues. Pests can also gain entry into a home through "hitchhiking" on personal belongings or other objects such as grocery items. Some rodents and insects are capable of carrying pathogens which can cause illness. For example, deer mice can be carriers of hantavirus. Exposure to hantavirus can occur

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when cleaning up mice droppings or contact is made with contaminated household items or food. Prompt identification of a pest or rodent will assist in determining if there is a risk. Infestations can cause a great deal of stress for the people affected by them and infestations can be extremely difficult to manage. Pest control companies, using an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program, may be required to remove infestations from homes.

- **Drinking Water** – Access to safe drinking water is essential to our health and well-being. While municipal drinking water systems are tested for bacteria and other contaminants regularly, homes which rely on private wells or lakes for their water supply must complete their own testing to ensure the water is safe to drink. Testing of wells should be completed a minimum of three times per year to make sure the water meets the Ontario Drinking Water Quality Standards.

Community actions to support adequate, affordable and suitable housing

- Help to eliminate homelessness by providing stable permanent housing and community supports for those without a home.
- Support strategies that allow for the development of affordable, adequate and suitable housing for middle and lower income families and individuals in all neighbourhoods.
- Invest in the re-development and re-vitalization of lower income neighbourhoods, including access to amenities such as public spaces, community gardens and recreation.
- Provide active transportation and public transit infrastructure in lower income neighbourhoods to support residents' access to grocery stores, social and health services, schools, recreational facilities and employment areas.
- Build multi-unit dwellings that are smoke-free.
- Support people who can't attain housing to have a voice when decisions are being made that affect them.
- Learn about how housing instability and homelessness affects everyone in Simcoe Muskoka.
- Volunteer with organizations to help provide housing to those most affected.

How does the health unit help improve housing and health?

Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit receives more than 200 calls per year on housing related issues from residents of Simcoe and Muskoka. The health unit collaborates with community partners and stakeholders, including developers and landlords, to respond to housing concerns and develop solutions. For more information on housing and health, visit www.smdhu.org.

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References

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