



Ask The Kitchen Guy Blog

December 2nd, 2010

“Q: Hey Kitchen Guy, we would like to remodel our home starting with the kitchen. However, we have to be very careful with the materials we choose because our child has severe allergies. Where and how do we get started?”

A: Designing or remodeling a space that will be occupied by someone with severe allergies or sensitivity to materials due to a medical condition is serious business. Accordingly, the burden to ensure your remodeled or new space is as safe as possible ultimately lands on the home owners shoulders.

I recommend you follow the steps outlined in an earlier blog “Kitchen Commandments” emphasizing these additional procedures.

1. Plan, plan and plan again. When dealing with severe allergies or sensitivities to materials, your plan should be in a three ring binder and have a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for every material to be used. See below for more information on that.
2. Remember, designing and remodeling a kitchen is a process. Remain organized and diligent during the process. Use a 3 ring binder to start a project book. Someone’s health or life may be riding on your choices.
3. Think Green, eco-friendly products are just the starting point for your material selections. Beware of “Green Washing” the not so nice practice of claiming to be green or eco-friendly when they are not. For something this important do not trust what you read on the internet or in a brochure.

To my knowledge every US based manufacturer is required by law to keep MSDS sheets for every product used in their plants and products. Any responsible manufacturer should be willing and able to supply you with those sheets. MSDS sheets can be very technical. Do your best to understand those documents. Don’t be afraid to seek technical advice to gain better understanding of the materials.

4. Professional services and reviews: You will probably need to hire a kitchen design professional with the necessary contacts to procure the documents you need. Additionally you should require your contractor to supply you with an MSDS for every material they plan to supply and use, especially adhesives.

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Make sure you have the “Cure Rates” for each material if it is not specified on the MSDS. A long cure rate could mean you have to deal with some odors for a while. This may or may not be an issue. You will have to decide.

When you have all this information put together in your binder have the designer and contractor review everything for accuracy. Then I encourage you in the strongest possible terms to bring the whole package to your doctor(s) for their review. Additionally, explain the process or approach you are taking to your project and ask them for any additional steps or recommendations they suggest.

Depending on the severity of the medical condition(s) you are dealing with you may also want to seek advice from any nationally recognized groups or societies dealing with the same or similar medical conditions. Here are a few to get you started:

The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America www.aafa.org

The American Lung Association www.lungusa.org

5. Before construction starts or materials are ordered your plans and budget should be completed. I have attached a sample budget with columns to reference MSDS sheets and a place to record who reviewed the data and when they signed off.
6. If your property is governed by community associations make sure the management and/or board of directors has approved your plans and materials. If you and your contractor plan to be running air handling equipment to provide extra air filtration during construction make sure management is aware of it and are in agreement with whatever additional noise that equipment might create. You may also need to ask for an area to be designated where materials can be cut outside the living area.
7. Make sure you hire the right contractor(s) with experience doing exactly what you need. A clear understanding of the gravity of your situation must be conveyed. I recommend a daily review of the project and materials. Make it clear that the job site should be as clean as possible at the end of the day.

I would also advise that the contractor be certified by the EPA for dealing with lead dust and other harmful agents. Even if your home was built after 1978. That type of experience can prove vital to successful completion of your project.

