

# Allergies: Controlling Your Environment

If you have allergies, many things inside and outside your home can trigger or worsen allergy symptoms. The things that cause allergy symptoms are called allergens. Some common allergens in the environment are pollen, mold, house dust, animal dander, cockroaches, cigarette smoke, and perfume. Other substances that are irritating can make allergy symptoms worse. Examples of irritants include smog, strong odors and cold air.

You can lessen your allergy symptoms by trying to limit your contact with these allergy triggers and irritants, especially in places where you spend a lot of time, such as at home, school, or your office. Here are some things you can do.

## Pollens

Pollens from grasses, weeds, and some trees can be carried through the air for miles. These pollens land in the eyes, nose, and airways, causing the symptoms of allergies or asthma. Although it is hard to avoid pollens completely, some suggestions are:

- Keep doors and windows shut in the pollen season. Use an air conditioner, if you have one, in your house and car. If a room air conditioner is used, recirculate the indoor air rather than pulling air in from outside. Wash or change air filters once a month. Don't use window or attic fans. Doing these things can also help keep smog irritants out of your home.
- Stay away from trees and grasses as much as you can in the pollen season and wear a hat to keep pollen from getting into your hair.
- After being outside during allergy season, shower, wash your hair, and change your clothes right away. Do not keep the dirty clothes in bedrooms because there may be pollen on the clothes.
- Dry your clothes in a dryer, not outside.
- The best time to avoid most pollen allergens is in the morning. If you need to go out, try to do it before 10 AM.
- Find a reliable source for local pollen counts and, if possible, stay indoors on days when the pollen count is high.

## Mold

Molds are found year-round throughout the house, outdoors, and in foods, but especially in areas of high moisture. Molds blow around in the air both outdoors and indoors. Bathrooms and damp basements are common areas for mold growth. Mold is also very likely to grow in swamp coolers, humidifiers, and the refrigerator drip pan and crisper. Here are some ways to decrease mold growth:

- Fix all leaks and clean the kitchen and bathroom tile, floors, shower curtain, and tub thoroughly and often. Also clean under the sink. Use a cleaning solution that kills molds. For example, you can use diluted household bleach (1 cup of bleach in 10 cups of water).

- Use paint rather than wallpaper on your walls. Enamel paint stops mold growth better than latex paint. An antifungal substance can be added to paints to keep mold from growing.
- Dehumidifiers can help keep mold from growing in damp places like basements. Look for areas that get damp from hard rains and fix any leaks that you find.
- Avoid evaporative coolers (also called swamp or desert coolers), vaporizers, and humidifiers with a reservoir, if you can, because they are ideal places for mold and bacteria to grow. When these appliances are operating, molds and bacteria can be sprayed throughout the house. If you do use one, empty the reservoir daily, clean it with soap and water, and dry it thoroughly. The reservoir should be refilled just before use.
- Greenhouses, compost piles, and homes with many plants also frequently have molds. Cover the potting soil of houseplants with foil to reduce the spread of mold spores.
- Remove any dry rot in wood frame housing.
- Clean indoor trash cans with diluted bleach and keep them dry.

## Dust mites

Dust mites are very tiny, spiderlike bugs that you cannot see without a microscope. Their body parts and droppings are what you breathe in and can be allergic to. Contact with dust mites can trigger an asthma attack and continuous contact makes asthma worse if you are allergic to them.

Dust mites feed on skin flakes (dander) shed by humans and animals. They also need moisture from the air to live. Dust mites can be found in mattresses, pillows, carpet, upholstered furniture, bedding, clothes and soft toys. They are much less of a problem at high altitudes (over 3000 feet above sea level) or in very dry climates unless you use a humidifier in your home.

It's not possible to completely get rid of dust mites but there are things you can do so that there are fewer of them and to limit your exposure to them.

- Avoid clutter and dust catchers, particularly in the bedroom. These include knickknacks, wall decorations (pictures, pennants, and fabric wall coverings), drapes, shades or blinds, stacks of books, and piles of papers or toys.
- Keep the bedroom closet door closed. Vacuum the closet floor often. Store only in-season clothes in the closet.
- Bare floors are best. You can replace carpet with washable, nonskid rugs. Damp mop the floors often. If you have carpet, vacuum often and thoroughly. Be sure to clean under the furniture and in the closet.
- Mattresses should be in coverings that are allergen-proof, such as plastic. You can get allergen-proof coverings where bed linens are sold. Zippers or openings should be taped. Cover pillows with allergen-proof covers or wash the pillows each week in hot water. Also wash blankets, sheets, and pillowcases in very hot water (at least 130° F, or 54.4° C) every week. Cooler water used with detergent and bleach can also work. Be sure linens and pillows are completely dry before using them.

- Forced-air furnaces should have a dust-filtering system. Filters should be changed at least once a month during the heating season. Filters can be cut to cover room vents if the central furnace filters are not changed monthly. Cold and warm air ducts should be professionally cleaned at least every 4 to 5 years.
- Use an air cleaner with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter or an electrostatic filter.
- Keep the humidity in the house to 60% or lower. It is best to have 30 to 50% humidity. Dehumidifiers or central air conditioners can take moisture out of the air if you live in a humid climate.
- Try not to sleep or lie on cloth-covered cushions or furniture.
- Don't keep carpets in bedrooms and remove any carpets laid on concrete, if you can. (Condensation collects between concrete and carpet.)
- Keep stuffed toys out of the bed, or wash the toys weekly in hot water or in cooler water with detergent and bleach. Placing toys weekly in a dryer or freezer may help. Prolonged exposure to dry heat or freezing can kill mites but does not remove allergens.
- If you usually get symptoms during housecleaning or yard work, wear a mask (available in drugstores) over your nose and mouth during these chores.

## **Pets**

Pet allergens are found in animal dander (dried skin flakes or dandruff), saliva, and urine. They cause allergic reactions in many people. You may be more sensitive to one type of animal (such as cats) than another. All furry animals can cause allergic reactions.

If you are sensitive to animals and have a pet, the pet should live outside or stay in just one part of the house and NEVER be in the bedroom. Have family members brush or comb pets outdoors. Wash your hands right after touching a pet.

Giving away a family pet is very hard, but if someone in your home is very sensitive, it may be necessary. Once the pet is gone, thoroughly clean the house. It is especially important to clean stuffed furniture, wall surfaces, rugs, drapes, and the heating/cooling system.

## **Cockroaches**

Cockroaches and their droppings are a common allergy trigger. To get rid of cockroaches:

- Keep food and garbage in containers with tight lids. Take garbage out daily before bedtime.
- Never leave food out. Especially keep it out of bedrooms. Don't leave pet food or dirty food bowls out.
- Vacuum or sweep the floor, wash the dishes, and wipe off countertops and the stove right after meals. Keep cupboards clean.

- Fix water sources that attract these pests, such as leaky faucets and drain pipes.
- Plug up cracks around the house to help stop cockroaches from getting in.
- Don't store paper bags, newspapers, or cardboard boxes.
- Use bait stations and other environmentally safe roach poisons.

## **Smoke and other irritants**

Anyone with allergies should not smoke and should avoid being around those who do smoke. If others want to smoke, they should smoke outside. No smoking should be allowed in the car or in the house.

Avoid wood-burning fireplaces and stoves. Stay away from areas with heavy smoke from grass or forest fires. Try not to breathe fumes from paint, insecticides, household cleaners, or other products containing irritants.

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