

Education

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 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. Do not use an attic fan.
- After being outside during allergy season, shower and change your clothes right away. Do not keep the dirty clothes in bedrooms because there may be pollen on the clothes.
- Stay away from trees and grasses as much as you can in the pollen season.
- Dry your clothes in a vented dryer, not outside.

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 two 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:

- In the bathroom, thoroughly clean the tile, floors, shower curtain, and tub on a routine basis. Also clean under the sink. Use a cleaning solution that kills molds. For example, you can use diluted household bleach (1 cup of bleach to 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 such as basements. Look for areas that become damp from hard rains and fix any leaks that you find.
- Evaporative coolers, vaporizers, and humidifiers with a reservoir are ideal places for mold and bacteria to grow. When these appliances are operating, molds and bacteria can be sprayed throughout the house. In general, these appliances are not recommended. 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.

House Dust

All kinds of things are in house dust, including dirt, insect debris, dust mites, dead skin, food crumbs, bacteria, and fungi. Dust collects on every item in the home, including mattresses, couches, clothes, rugs, drapes, and stuffed animals. It is hard to avoid house dust, but the following ideas will help:

- 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, box springs, and pillows should be in coverings that are allergen-proof (nonallergenic), such as plastic. Zippers or openings should be taped. Use only polyester pillows and wash them several times a year. Wash blankets, sheets, and pillowcases in very hot water (130 degrees F) every week. Avoid products made of feather, wool, kapok, or foam.
- 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.
- 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

Dander is a substance found in animal saliva, dandruff, and urine. It causes 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. 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. 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. Wash your hands after touching pets.

Cockroaches

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

- Keep food and garbage in containers with tight lids. Take garbage out often.
- Never leave food out. Especially keep it out of bedrooms. Do not leave out pet food or dirty food bowls.
- Vacuum or sweep the floor, wash the dishes, and wipe off countertops and the stove right after meals.
- 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.
- Do not store paper bags, newspapers, or cardboard boxes.
- Use bait stations and other environmentally safe roach poisons.

Smoking 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.

Try not to breathe fumes from paint, insecticides, strong cleansers, or products containing irritants.

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