

Reducing allergy, asthma triggers at home is key

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Be it ever so humble, there's truly no place like home to soothe weary souls — and soles. But before you kick off your shoes and breathe that deep, sweet sigh of relief, you might want to consider what you're breathing in. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the air inside your home can be two to five times more polluted than the air outside, and indoor air pollution can trigger symptoms for people living with allergies and asthma.

Allergies are diseases of the immune system that cause an overreaction to substances called "allergens." Allergies, as well as the most common type of asthma, are triggered by year-round inhaled allergens such as dust mites, pet dander and mold.

Asthma is a chronic pulmonary condition in which the airways become blocked or narrowed when stimulated by allergens or other environmental triggers.

If you suffer from allergies or asthma — or both — you aren't alone. Asthma and

allergies strike 25 percent of Americans. Asthma, however, is even higher among blacks, who have more asthma attacks than whites and are more likely to be hospitalized for the disease.

"Studies have shown that if the major indoor triggers of asthma were all eliminated, asthma attacks could be decreased by 60 percent," says Norman H. Edelman, MD, chief medical officer for the American Lung Association.

What's at the top of the hit list?

"Cigarette smoke," Edelman says. "Any home in which a person with asthma and allergies lives should be absolutely off limits to smoking, with no exceptions made."

Factoid:

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1 FIGHT THE MITE

Enclose pillows and mattresses in allergen-impermeable covers, or wash your pillows every week in hot water and dry thoroughly. Also, consider removing wall-to-wall carpeting and replacing it with tile or wood floors.

If that's not an option, vacuum often with a vacuum cleaner equipped with a high-efficiency purifying air filtration system, also known as a HEPA system. And don't forget to toss the bag in the trash after vacuuming, because dust mites can escape.

2 BUST THE DUST

Thousands of microscopic spiders, called dust mites, live in a pinch of house dust. Dust mites feed on skin flakes and can be found throughout the home. The tiny pests produce airborne particles that can trigger allergic reactions or asthma attacks when inhaled.

Dust mites thrive in moist air, so reducing moisture is your best weapon. Use a dehumidifier to maintain the relative humidity in your home below 50 percent, says Steven Kernerman, DO, an asthma and allergy specialist in Spokane, Wash.

An inexpensive device known as a hygrometer, available at hardware stores, is handy for measuring relative humidity, Kernerman says.



Indoor allergens such as dust, cigarette smoke, pets or bugs can make allergies or asthma worse.

3 PUT MOLD ON HOLD

High indoor humidity can encourage the growth of mold, another common culprit of allergy and asthma symptoms. Indoor mold is commonly found in basements, bathrooms, closets, attics, old mattresses, pillows and blankets. Limit opportunities for mold to grow by removing carpeting and wallpaper in basements and bathrooms. Use diluted bleach to eliminate visible mold growth in showers and on shower curtains.

4 PLUG THE BUGS

Cockroaches leave droppings that can trigger allergic reactions and asthma episodes when inhaled. A study funded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases found that the combination of cockroach allergy and exposure to the creatures is a major cause of asthma-related illness and hospitalizations among children living in densely populated urban areas.

Keep cockroaches at bay by plugging up crevices around the house, storing food and garbage in closed containers and mopping the kitchen floor at least once a week.



Furry Fact

Almost all pets, furry or feathered, can trigger asthma and allergies. Pets that trigger symptoms should be removed from the home, allergists say. Otherwise, keep them out of the bedroom. As lovable as they are, they all leave dander on beds, floors and furniture.



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