



Using natural cleaning solutions – which are easier on the budget than chemical-packed versions – will go a long way toward keeping your environment as allergen-free as possible.

Combat Your Indoor Allergies

Lose the sneezing and wheezing and promote your family's health by improving your indoor air quality. BY JUDI KETTLER

Outdoor allergens like pollen and ragweed can certainly send us running to the paper goods aisle to stock up on tissues. But your respiratory system may very well be under attack because of the allergens and toxic chemicals living with you inside your home. Exposure to allergens such as dust mites, pet dander and mold – as well as assorted toxic chemicals – can result in inflammation of your nasal passages, eyes and lungs. “We call this perennial allergic rhinitis,” says William Anderson, MD, an allergist with the Asthma & Allergy Center of Whatcom County in Bellingham, Washington. “Some people are genetically predisposed to develop these types of allergies, although you can develop an allergy at any point in your life,” he adds.

How Allergies Work

According to a survey cited in the review article, “Quality of Indoor Residential Air and Health,” published in the July 2008 issue of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (CMAJ), the average person in North America spends 87 percent of his or her time in buildings, compared to only six percent in cars and seven percent outside. Like it or not, we’re an indoor culture, which means we’re continually exposed to things like dust and off-gasses from chemicals. In fact, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA), eight out of 10 people in the US are exposed to dust mites, and six out of 10 are exposed to pet dander. These pesky tiny particles circulate through the air, settling into fabric (such as bedding and furniture) and on floor surfaces.

To form an allergy, your body goes through a sensitization process, says Anderson. One of the jobs of your immune system is to form antibodies, which circulate in your bloodstream. When you’re exposed to an allergen like dust mites, they can bind to the antibody, which causes a release of histamine – producing symptoms like a runny nose, scratchy throat, sneezing, itchy eyes and headaches. “It’s an aberrant immune response, but it can feel like you’re under attack because your body keeps producing histamine,” Anderson says. To stop the

histamine response, you can take medication. Or, you can try to eliminate the allergy at its source by reducing the amount of allergens in your home.

Dust

Dust is the most common indoor allergen, and one of the most difficult to get rid of. Let’s face it, living produces dust, and even the most vigilant housekeeper can’t zap it all away. Dust mites, the fecal pellet of the dust mite in the dust, are the real culprits. (Additionally, dust can contain other allergens, such as pollens and animal dander.) Dust mites thrive in humidity, Anderson explains. “They absorb moisture from the air and ingest our dried skin,” he adds. The first step is simply to



We now know that gasses from cleaning products ride on the back of dust. Luckily, it’s an easy fix.

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A clean living space is essential for you and your family's health, particularly when the average North American spends 87 percent of their time indoors.



examine your indoor environment and identify the big dust mite traps, like a moist basement, an old couch or high pile carpeting. Anderson suggests you try these tips for reducing dust in your home:

VACUUM OFTEN WITH A HEPA FILTER VACUUM. “A HEPA vacuum filter can help trap dust, but it won’t solve the problem,” he says. Try wearing a dust mask when cleaning and dust with damp cloths. Get some fresh air by leaving your house for a few hours after you clean.

ENCASE YOUR MATTRESS, box spring and pillows in an allergen impermeable cover. According to the CMAJ article, research has found that this can reduce allergen concentrations by about 89 percent.

USE HOT WATER (HEATED TO 130 DEGREES) TO WASH YOUR SHEETS, blankets, pillows and fabric toys weekly. Hot water kills dust mites.

REDUCE YOUR HUMIDITY. “Dust mites can’t survive at humidity lower than 50 percent, so you want to aim for 40 to 45 percent,” says Anderson. Consider investing in a de-humidifier.

MAKE SMART FURNITURE AND FABRIC CHOICES. Opt for fabrics like leather that can be wiped (upholstered pieces are dust collectors and they can’t be easily washed).

Pet Dander

Interestingly, according to the CMAJ article, there is conflicting data on whether early exposure to pets reduces or increases a child’s risk for developing asthma. Unfortunately, both children and adults can develop pet allergies any time during their lives – including after you finally decide to adopt a pet, once little Mittens has already wormed his way into your heart. Parting with a pet is often just not an option. So what can you do?

FREQUENT BATHING. Washing a cat or dog can reduce allergen levels for a few days. Brushing your pet to frequently remove shedding hair is another great way to reduce dander.

RESTRICT THEIR ACCESS. At the very least, bar your pet from the bedroom, so you can get some sneeze-free sleep. Also, the AAFA recommends covering the vent in your bedroom with something dense like cheesecloth.

OPT FOR BARE FLOORS OR LOW-PILE CARPET, so the dander has less chance of settling in. Thick or shag carpeting is the worst.

WASH YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY and always after you’ve touched your pet.

Mold

Mold thrives in moist areas, like bathrooms and basements. “Mold can cause the same allergy symptoms as dust mites, but it can also cause pneumonia-like inflammation in the lungs,” Anderson says. The best way to control mold is to keep your humidity low (again, 50 percent or lower), make

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sure your bathrooms are properly vented, and watch out for any leaks in the basement where mold can form. The best defense against mold is vigilance.

Cleaning Product Chemicals

Dust is a problem in and of itself, says Debra Lynn Dadd, author of *Home Safe Home: Creating a Healthy Home Environment by Reducing Exposure to Toxic Household Products* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2005), but it’s even more complicated than we thought. “We now know that gasses from chemicals ride on the back of dust,” she says. The most toxic – and most common – chemicals that produce the dangerous off-gasses linked to everything from headaches and fatigue to birth defects and cancer are cleaning products. This is surprising to many people, but it’s good news, Dadd says, because it’s an easy fix.

“REMOVE THE CHEMICAL AT ITS SOURCE AND YOU AVOID THE GAS,” Dadd says. Trade your bleach, aerosol sprays and other household cleaners for natural solutions, she says. There’s almost nothing that can’t be cleaned with baking soda, water and vinegar.

GET A HIGH-EFFICIENCY HVAC FILTER FOR YOUR FURNACE.

These are inexpensive and easy to install. Dadd recommends specific ones at her website dld123.com, under “Debra’s List.”

Other Chemicals

Your home is probably full of products that can off-gas and cause you to feel ill. It can be overwhelming to make large changes overnight, Dadd says, but ridding your home of toxic chemicals is a process. “Make a list of what you want to change, and then take it step-by-step,” she advises. Here are a few more things to include on your list:

DRY-CLEANING CHEMICALS

Let your dry-cleaned clothing air out (out of the bag) for a few days in a well-ventilated area.

PAINT Opt for low-VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) or VOC-free paint. There are more options available than ever from companies like Benjamin Moore. Even the big box retailers are starting to offer more eco-friendly paint options.

ROOM DEODORIZERS AND BODY PRODUCTS WITH FRAGRANCE

Fresh air is the best deodorizer, and choose fragrance-free products whenever possible.

FORMALDEHYDE Choose solid wood furniture instead of particleboard or plywood, which is processed with formaldehyde – an airway irritant and suspected carcinogen. The CMAJ article cites a study of 88 adults – 50 percent with asthma – where respiratory symptoms were tied to residential formaldehyde.

RADON After smoking and inhalation of secondhand smoke, radon is next in line for what causes lung cancer. The EPA recommends having all homes tested for radon.

CARBON MONOXIDE Never let your car run in your attached garage, and make sure that your gas stove, furnace or fireplaces are properly vented outside. Also be sure to have a properly functioning carbon monoxide detector in the home.

Cleaning the Duct Work

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA), there’s no strong evidence that having your air ducts cleaned can improve indoor air quality and lessen indoor allergies. But some allergy sufferers report finding it helpful. Companies that do this use a powerful vacuum to suck out the debris from your ducts. There are other methods, too. However, if you hire a professional to do this, make sure that they’re not using any chemical sealants, which can break down and make the air quality even worse.

HEPA Filters

High-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters help to filter the nasty allergen particles in the air. According to allergist William Anderson, MD, they’re not particularly adept at filtering dust because dust mites are relatively heavy and drop out of the air fairly quickly. They can be more helpful for pet dander though. “Even with a HEPA filter, there will still be dander,” Anderson says, but you can at least reduce the dander in a particular room. Leave the filter running around the clock and keep the door shut. ©