

Healthy Home Guide

Advice for creating a Healthy Home

Controlling Your Environment

World Asthma Day, celebrated May 5th during Asthma Awareness Month, highlights a significant issue facing many families. Although there are various triggers, professionals agree that the presence of pests, dust mites, mold, and rodents are the leading trigger for asthma and allergy sufferers.



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According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), indoor air can be significantly more polluted than outdoor air. Since it is estimated that we spend 90% of our time indoors, indoor air quality is important, especially if you have asthma or allergies.

More than 20 million people have asthma, which is the #1 chronic disease among children in the U.S. and a leading disease among adults. People with asthma should talk to their doctor about developing a comprehensive asthma action plan that includes information on treatment, emergency care, and preventive tips, such as how to reduce exposure to common asthma and allergy triggers.

Reducing the sources of triggers, and exposure to triggers is called environmental control and is a cornerstone of asthma and allergy management.

The tips included in this guide are not intended to replace the advice of a doctor. This guide provides information to help reduce exposure to possible asthma and allergy triggers in your home.

Asthma & Allergy Triggers

Common Indoor Asthma & Allergy Triggers

Allergens:

Many people with asthma and allergies have symptoms that can be caused by exposure to certain triggers called “allergens”. Household allergens can be found in mattresses, pillows, rugs, furniture, stuffed toys, bathrooms, basements, attics, air ducts, and more.

Allergens in the home include:

- Dust mites
- Mold
- Pet or animal dander
- Cockroaches
- Pollen

Irritants:

Asthma & allergy symptoms can also be caused by exposure to some triggers called “irritants”. A variety of particles that can pollute indoor air and disturb or irritate the airways in the lungs. Many household irritants can be found in certain types of paints, varnishes, waxes, solvents, cleaning products, pesticides, cosmetics, fuels, and more.

Irritants in the home include:

- Cleaning products
- Detergents
- Tobacco smoke
- Pesticides
- Paint

Tips to help reduce exposure to asthma & allergy triggers:

1. Clean and replace HEPA filters based on manufacturers instructions
2. Use dust mite-resistant mattresses and pillowcases.
3. Consider blinds instead of heavy drapes and curtains
4. Purchase cleaning products that are low or no volatile organic compounds

General Tips to reduce your exposure to allergens

House Dust:

Ordinary house dust actually makes up a collection of all types of allergens.

Pollen from outdoors, pet and animal dander, mites, dirt, insect droppings, mold, and more. All of which can trigger an asthma attack in people with allergic asthma. To reduce the exposure to these types of allergens, keep all hard and soft surfaces wiped down and vacuumed weekly to reduce the overall house dust.

Windows & Doors:

Window sills and door jams are also the most likely places to find mold.

To reduce exposure to mold, wipe down window sills and doors weekly and use a mold and mildew spray to clean these areas to prevent mold growth.

Flooring:

Every type of flooring is a potential breeding ground for allergens.

Carpet, tile and hardwood all can be a source for allergens. Vigilant cleaning the surfaces is recommended. Wall to wall carpet is more difficult to remove moisture, mold, and other allergens, but weekly vacuuming will reduce the amount of allergens.

Humidity:

Mites and mold both thrive on humidity around the house.

Use a de-humidifier in bedrooms and other areas to keep humidity at 50% or less

Air Filtration:

Allergens are tiny and light particles. To reduce these allergens in the home a high efficiency particulate air filter (HEPA) in the whole house central air system is recommended. Replace filters regularly for high efficiency operation.

Keeping the home healthy

According to various reports, including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), asthma symptoms in children whose homes were remodeled to reduce triggers such as dust mites, mold, mice and cockroaches. Remodeling is a step families can take to keep their homes healthy.

When remodeling or building a home, the dust and fumes can make breathing difficult, especially for those with asthma. Here are some tips to consider when planning a home remodeling or building project.

- **Floors & Wall Frames**

Be careful of plywood or pressed wood wall paneling, particleboard, frames, and fiberboard which may emit volatile organic compounds. Use hardwood flooring and frames instead.

- **Windows & Doors**

Most of the moisture in the home makes its way in through windows and doors. Condensation on window panes, poor weather stripping along windowsills and doors, and infrequent cleaning of the areas can allow water to pool and collect, making it easy for mold and mildew to grow. Make sure windows and doors are properly sealed to prevent this condensation from collecting.

- **Wallboard**

Use backer boards and wall coverings that are moisture and mold resistant, especially in the bathroom and kitchen walls and ceilings. Try to avoid products, such as glass mesh cement backer boards, which generate unnecessary debris during handling and installation.

- **Flooring**

Avoid wall to wall carpet. Carpeting is a common home for dust mites. Choose hardwood flooring and make sure you read the labels of all materials when choosing hard surfaces.

- **Cabinets & Furniture**

Avoid furniture and cabinets made from pressed wood. Many, although common, may have volatile organic compounds.

- **Whole House Air Filtration**

Central HVAC system with a replaceable or washable HEPA filter will help control indoor air quality.

Keeping the home healthy

- **Ventilation**

In addition to air conditioning and air filtration, house ventilation is important to ensure that moisture form certain spaces, such as bathrooms, laundry rooms, and kitchens is minimized. Ventilate all rooms including basements, garages, and attics where solvents, chemicals, and solvents are stored.

- **Humidity Control**

Keep household relative humidity lower than 50%. Higher humidity levels create a welcome environment for mold and mildew. A room de-humidifier and whole house humidity control systems can also be used or added.

- **Waterproofing**

Keep moisture from getting into the home. Wet or leaky pipes, windows, doors, basements, walls, etc. can allow water to collect making it easy for mold and mildew to grow.

- **Storage**

Do not keep solvents, chemicals, paints, fuels, and other like kind compounds in the garage, attic, or basement. If possible, keep these types of items in sheds or other buildings that are exterior to the home.

- **Landscaping**

Common indoor allergens are pollens from the outdoors. The plants near the home do matter. Management of the landscaping can reduce the amount of pollen around the home. Avoid planting oak, birch, and maple trees and make sure that you plan female (non-pollinating) forms of plants to keep pollen from easily getting into the home.

Special considerations to take when remodeling the home

1. If you do the work yourself, use a protective mask
2. Hang plastic sheeting over doorways.
3. Leave windows and doors open during the project
4. Set fans in windows and exhaust indoor air to the outside.
5. Remove debris out a window instead of carrying it through the house

Tips for Each Room

Practical Tips to remove allergens in each room

- **Bedroom**

Pet dander can settle on bed linens and become a food for dust mites. Pillows and blankets in the bedroom are frequently homes for mold and dust mites. Mold is frequently found in mattresses and pillows and releases spores that can trigger asthma symptoms.

Minimize allergens in the bedroom by:

1. Use special mite proof bedding, including pillows and mattress
2. Wash sheets once a week
3. Never let pets on the bed
4. Do not let wet clothing to pile up
5. Do not eat in bed
6. Replace mattresses every two years
7. Vacuum floors and furniture weekly

- **Kitchen**

One of the main allergens in a kitchen is cockroaches. Their droppings and even their microscopic shedding are believed to be the most common allergens.

Minimize allergens in the bedroom by:

1. Don't leave food or garbage out to attract insects.
2. Store food in tight containers.
3. Clean and wipe down stovetop right after cooking.
4. Wash dishes quickly after eating.
5. Use a sealed trash can.
6. Install easy to clean kitchen flooring and wash rugs weekly.
7. Keep all gas appliances properly serviced.

Asthma Triggers

Common Indoor Asthma Triggers

- **Bathroom**

Warm damp environments are breeding grounds for mold. As in the kitchen, keep areas under the sink, around shower, and shower doors keep dry.

Minimize allergens in the bedroom by:

1. Removing mold as soon as you see it anywhere in the bathroom.
2. Fix leaky pipes under the sink, in the shower/tub and behind the toilet.
3. Use a fan or vent when showering to keep air circulating and reduce moisture.
4. Wash towels weekly.
5. Avoid scented products such as potpourri and fresheners.

- **Living Room**

Dust mites find their way into furniture as easily as they do into beds, they lay eggs in upholstery and the carpet. Mold can grow on furniture and curtains as well.

Minimize allergens in the bedroom by:

1. Vacuum furniture, curtains, and drapes once a week.
2. Use washable slip covers and wash frequently
3. Keep pets off furniture
4. Use blinds and other easy to clean window treatments.
5. Avoid wood burning fireplaces as well as kerosene heaters
6. Avoid candles and air fresheners.

- **Basement**

Whether your basement is a room for recreation, storage, or laundry, it is a favorite space for allergens. Mold easily grows in the dark damp atmosphere, especially around beams and pipes, which releases spores and can trigger allergic asthma symptoms.

Minimize allergens in the bedroom by:

1. Locate and fix all leaks, seams, and cracks in the foundation where moisture seeps in.
2. Fix leaks and drips in pipes, around water heater and HVAC system.
3. Remove and clean mold wherever found.

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