

## Tips for Reducing Exposure to Allergens

An allergy is an unusual sensitivity to a substance or substances (allergens) that are normally harmless. Airborne allergens such as pollen, mold, and animal dander can cause a variety of symptoms, including sneezing, runny nose, or itchy/watery eyes. Minimizing your exposure to offending allergens can help reduce your symptoms. Many patients are allergic to more than one allergen,<sup>1</sup> and symptoms often occur only after several allergen exposures combined.<sup>2</sup> A strategy to reduce your exposure to individual allergens to reduce that overall load can help reduce your symptoms.<sup>2</sup> In addition, research also shows that medical treatments for allergy (such as antihistamines) are more effective if patients also decrease their exposure to allergens.<sup>3</sup> However, it is crucial to know exactly what you are allergic to. Specific IgE allergy testing can help your doctor pinpoint your specific allergies. The following tips will help you limit your exposure to common airborne allergens. Talk with your doctor about which allergies you have, and which tips to follow, based on the results of your specific IgE allergy test.

### Indoor allergens

#### You are allergic to: cockroaches

Cockroach saliva, fecal material, and cast skins are the main sensitizers for humans. The following tips are meant to aid in cockroach prevention and eradication. Thorough cleaning is required after extermination.

- Use insecticides or a professional exterminator to eliminate cockroaches
- Place bait traps
- Vacuum thoroughly
- Wash dishes daily
- Keep food or garbage in closed containers and take out garbage regularly
- Don't store paper bags, newspapers, or cardboard boxes
- Seal plumbing openings, cracks, and crevices
- Store food in sealed containers

#### You are allergic to: animal dander

Allergy to an animal (such as a cat or dog) is actually a sensitivity to the pet's skin flakes and fur. The following tips can help you limit your exposure to these allergens.

- If you own a furry pet, you may wish to find it a new home
- If you wish to keep your pet, try to keep it outdoors as much as possible
- Try not to let your pet into your bedroom
- Confine your pet to a room with a polished floor and wipeable furniture
- Use high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters and vacuum cleaners
- Wash your pet weekly in warm water
- Encase mattresses, pillows, and box springs in allergen-proof coverings

#### You are allergic to: house dust mites

Dust mites are invisible creatures that live in house dust and feed on dead skin flakes. Most tips to handle dust mites involve regular cleaning of the home and furnishings (including curtains and bedding).

- Keep the bedroom clean and clutter free
- Vacuum or dust weekly
- Use allergen-proof casings for mattresses, pillows, and box springs
- Wash bedding weekly in hot water (130°F)
- Avoid area during (and 20 minutes after) cleaning
- Avoid being present during housecleaning, if possible, or wear an appropriate mask if you are cleaning
- Change furnace and air conditioner filters regularly
- Replace upholstered furniture with leather, vinyl, wood, or plastic
- Use only washable window curtains

## Outdoor allergens

### You are allergic to: pollens

Pollens are the tiny airborne particles given off by trees, weeds, and grasses for the purpose of fertilization. Some pollens circulate only at certain times of the year, while others are present nearly year round. The following tips can help you any time of the year.

- If you can, avoid going outside when the pollen count is high
- Check your local paper and weather reports for pollen count forecasts. You can also log on to <http://www.pollen.com/Pollen.com.asp> to obtain updated pollen counts for your local area
- Have someone kill weeds by cutting them or using weed killers
- Keep windows closed and use air conditioners when possible
- Avoid plants related to ragweed (such as zinnias, chrysanthemums, marigolds, dahlias, or sunflowers)
- Use high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters and vacuum cleaners

## Mold allergens

### You are allergic to: outdoor mold spores

Molds live both indoors and outdoors. They give off spores that can cause allergic reactions. The following steps can help you avoid exposure to outdoor mold.

- Refrain from walking through uncut fields
- Avoid mowing grass, handling mulch or compost, raking leaves, or working with hay
- Avoid barns, greenhouses, sleeping bags, and summer cottages
- Keep windows and doors closed
- Avoid using fans that draw in outside air; use air conditioner when possible

### You are allergic to: indoor mold spores

The following steps can help you avoid exposure to indoor molds.

- Wash evaporative ("swamp") coolers
- Fix all water leaks
- Use an air conditioner and a dehumidifier to reduce indoor humidity to less than 50% if possible
- Frequently clean furnace filters, refrigerator, and dehumidifier (and clean drip pans with bleach)
- Thoroughly dry clothes before storing
- Clean moldy areas with fungicide or bleach
- Discard moldy belongings

### Additional resources

For more information on allergies and exposure reduction, visit these helpful Web sites:

<http://www.isitallergy.com>

<http://www.aafa.org>

<http://allergies.about.com>

<http://www.allergyanswers.us>

*Content provided in this document is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.*

#### References

1. Arbes SJ Jr, et al. *J Allergy Clin Immunol.* 2005;116:377-383.
2. Platt-Mills TAE, et al. *J Allergy Clin Immunol.* 2000;106:787-804.
3. Wickman M. *Allergy.* 2005;60(suppl 79):14-18.

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