

# Patient Education: Allergy Precautions In the Home

Margaret A. Krampfer, RN, FNP, CORLN

Allergies affect approximately 30% of the population in the United States. Allergy is defined as an inflammatory response to a foreign substance referred to as an allergen. Common allergens include house-dust mites (Table 1), mold spores (Table 2), foods (Table 3), pet danders (Table 4), grasses, trees and weeds (Table 5). Flowers rarely cause allergic symptoms because of their large pollen size. Allergens can be inhaled, ingested, and absorbed or injected through the skin. Symptoms of allergic disease vary from a mild irritation to life-threatening. Symptoms depend on the route of exposure, the target organ affected in the reaction, and the individual's immune propensity. Skin or blood testing can confirm suspicions of allergic disease. Treatment of allergic disease involves avoiding known offending allergens, taking medications to control symptoms, and in some patients desensitization by allergy injections or immunotherapy.

## Common Symptoms of Allergy

A wet, runny, drippy, sneezy nose is often described as "hayfever." These itchy wet symptoms typically result from exposure to airborne pollens. Allergy sufferers may also complain of nasal stuffiness, thick nasal discharge, headache, skin rashes, hives, coughing, and wheezing. Allergic reactions may produce acute or chronic symptoms.

## Conclusion

Decreasing allergen exposure can help to control allergy symptoms in sensitive people! Avoiding irritants such as cigarette smoke, perfumes, pollutants, and other chemicals can help to decrease irritability of the nasal passages.

**Table 1: Housedust Mites**

Microscopic bugs or "mites" live and feed in carpets, upholstery, and bedding. They produce droppings which in humans cause allergic symptoms. Concentrate cleaning efforts in the bedroom to control dust mite allergies.

- Damp dust and vacuum weekly, preferably not by the allergic person
- Change or clean furnace filter monthly
- Avoid feather pillows and down comforters
- Wash sheets and blankets weekly in hot water
- Avoid collection of "dust catchers" like stuffed animals
- Consider using high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters in bedroom and vacuum cleaner
- Use hardwood floors in bedroom

**Table 2: Mold Spores**

Mold spores are found in damp dark areas of the home such as basements, bathrooms, and kitchens. Discourage and eliminate mold growth by the following:

- Repair all leaks
- Use dehumidifiers in damp basements
- Clean shower grouting weekly
- Decrease houseplants, remove from bedroom, place fungicide in soil
- Clean refrigerator drip pan
- Meticulously clean or avoid using portable humidifiers
- Adjust whole house humidity to 40% or less
- Avoid wool fabrics
- Avoid foods that contain mold such as: fermented beverages, especially wine and beer, vinegar, cheese, foods with yeast breads and bakery products, canned tomato products, pizza, canned, smoked and pickled meats, and mushrooms.

**Table 3: Foods**

Any food can trigger an allergic reaction.

Eliminate forever, foods which are suspected of producing acute life-threatening symptoms. Common culprits are:

- Shellfish
- Peanuts

Eliminate for six months, foods which cause or contribute to chronic allergies, despite any cravings for them. Then reintroduce the foods in a rotating manner. Common culprits are:

- Milk
- Egg
- Wheat
- Corn
- Soy
- Yeast

**Table 4: Pet Danders**

Cat dander is light and highly allergenic. Dog dander is heavier.

Decrease danders by:

- Having only outdoor pets
- Removing pets from the bedroom
- Grooming or bathing pet regularly (not by the allergic person)
- Washing hands after touching the pet

**Note:** In 2007, a hypoallergenic breed of cat may be available (CNN, 2004).

**Table 5: Pollens**

Airborne pollens which are present during blooming seasons trigger allergic symptoms. While pollination cycles vary somewhat between geographic regions, trees tend to pollinate in the early spring; grasses in the late spring; and weeds in the fall. Decrease exposure to pollens by:

- Keeping windows closed
- Grooming pets which can carry pollen into the home
- Avoiding attic fans

**Suggested Reading**

May, J.C., & Sarnet, J.M. (2001). *My house is killing me: The home guide for families with allergy and asthma*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

**References**

CNN. (2004, Nov. 3). *Technology explorers special report: Genetically modified cats for sale*. Associated Press. Retrieved November 4, 2004 from <http://www.cnn.com/2004/TECH/10/27/biotechnology.cats/>

**About the Author**

Margaret A. Kramper, RN, FNP, CORLN is a Sinus/Allergy Nurse Coordinator in the Department of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.