

Managing Your Asthma: Avoiding Allergens

Triggers are things that can irritate the airways or lead to reactions in those who are sensitized to them. There are two kinds of triggers: allergens and irritants. For people with asthma, exposure to allergens can increase the risk of having asthma symptoms. This fact sheet covers ways you can avoid allergens. For more information about asthma and allergens, go to the ATS Patient Information Series at www.thoracic.org/patients/



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Allergen triggers are things that can cause an allergic reaction. They only affect people who are sensitized (allergic) to them. To find out what your triggers are, your healthcare provider can help you get tested. You may already know about some of your triggers because you have symptoms after being exposed. Symptoms can begin right away or start in the hours after.

This checklist covers ways you can avoid common allergens around you that may cause asthma problems. If you are a parent or caregiver of a child with asthma, help your child learn to avoid these as well. You can ask your healthcare provider for tips about other allergens not included here. Many allergens are hard to avoid completely. If you continue to have problems with asthma control, you can also talk with your healthcare provider or an allergist about whether you might benefit from trying immunotherapy (treatment to help desensitize you) to specific allergens. Treating allergy symptoms of the nose (runny nose or itchy nose) is also important, as these can also trigger asthma problems.

Tips for avoiding or getting rid of common thing(s) you or your child is or may be allergic to:

Dust/dustmite (*dust mites are microscopic insects that live in houses*)

- Wash bedding (sheets, blankets, etc.) in hot water once a week in 130 degrees F°. Avoid feather and natural down bedding.
- Put allergen-proof (also called “mite-proof”) covers on pillows, mattress and box springs—the best products carry the “asthma & allergy friendly® certified” seal.
- Try to keep stuffed toys off beds. Choose washable stuffed toys and wash them regularly. Remove heavy drapery or curtains. Remove wall-to-wall carpets from the bedroom if possible.
- Consider removing carpets and rugs throughout the house. If you cannot, vacuum them weekly (use a high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) vacuum if possible). Wait

2 hours after cleaning for dust to settle down before entering the room. If you are allergic, you should try not to vacuum yourself or consider wearing a N95 particulate mask.

- Change furnace and air conditioner filters at least every 3 months. Install a high efficiency air (HEPA) filter with a MERV rating of 11 or 12 in the furnace and AC unit. Have your heating and air-conditioning units inspected and serviced every 6 months.
- Dust regularly with a damp cloth. Wear a mask while dusting, sweeping or vacuuming.
- If you have asthma, try to stay away when cleaning is being done as dust gets in the air. If you are cleaning, consider wearing an N95 particulate mask.
- Do not use a vaporizer or humidifier. If your home has high humidity (moisture in the air), consider using a dehumidifier. Measure the indoor humidity using a hygrometer. Try to keep humidity below 55 percent. Use vent fans in bathroom and when cooking to remove moisture. Repair all water leaks.

Molds (*includes many types of fungus, yeast, and mildew—common in wet areas, humid climates and with water damage*)

- Wash visible mold/mildew off hard surfaces with soap and water only. Remember there is often mold and mildew that you cannot see in or behind these materials. Remove particle board, wallpaper, carpeting that is moldy or that cannot be dried thoroughly within 24-48 hours of getting wet.
- Fix water leaks, dampness and moisture problems in your home as these can lead to mold growth.
- Keep drip pans in air conditioner and refrigerator clean and dry.
- Keep humidity levels in the house below 50% (usually with air conditioning). Consider a dehumidifier if you have high humidity.
- Change air conditioner filters every month. Keep windows and doors closed.

- Watch outdoor mold count reports—stay indoors or wear a mask when counts are high. For mold counts, see: <https://www.aaaai.org/Tools-for-the-Public/Allergy,-Asthma-Immunology-Glossary/Mold-Counts-Defined>.
- Avoid walking through uncut fields, raking leaves, or working with hay. Avoid being outside while grass is being mowed.
- Follow mold counts and reduce outside time when mold counts are high.



Pollens (tiny particles in the air given off by plants including trees, weeds and grasses)

- Watch outdoor pollen counts—if high try to stay indoors or wear a mask. Wear a respirator or N95 mask when outdoors with high pollen counts or likely high exposure from mowing or gardening.
- Go to www.pollen.com/Pollen.com.asp to track pollen levels or watch on your local news or weather channels.
- Reduce or avoid outdoor activity when pollen counts are high. If possible, stay indoors during mid-day and afternoon hours when pollen counts are highest.
- Shower and wash your hair at bedtime and/or after working outside; remove your work clothes to wash. Leave footwear at the door and clean pets after walking outside to decrease pollen transfer.
- Don't hang clothes outdoors. Pollen may cling to laundry.
- Put air conditioner on re-circulate air in the car to avoid bringing pollen in.
- Keep windows closed when driving or riding in a car.
- Change air conditioner filters monthly—use high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters if possible.

Pests (such as cockroaches and rodents)

- Do not leave out food, and store leftovers in airtight containers.
- Do not leave out garbage. Store it in covered containers and take it out daily.
- Wash and dry dishes, pots & pans, kitchen counters promptly. Keep surfaces and floors clean and free of clutter.
- Don't store paper bags, newspapers, or cardboard boxes in your home.
- Use baits, boric acid, or traps. Fix any water leaks. Seal plumbing openings, cracks, and crevices.

- If using pest sprays, try to limit spraying to the infested areas. Follow instructions on label. Allow room to air out well after spraying. Make sure the person with asthma is away from the room when spraying and for 8-10 hours after.

Animals (furry or feathered such as dogs or cats)

There is no such thing as a hypoallergenic (allergen-free) pet. If you are allergic to a pet with fur or feathers, you are allergic to a protein in their urine and saliva. There is no evidence to suggest that pets with certain types of fur or shed less are safe for those with pet allergy.

- Keep pets out of the bedroom and other sleeping areas at all times.
- Keep pets off fabric-covered furniture, carpet, and stuffed toys.
- Wash your pet weekly with warm water and soap.
- Use high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) air filters for air conditioners. Change filters monthly.

Action Steps:

You can manage asthma to avoid problems.

Take action by:

- ✓ Knowing your triggers and avoiding them as best you can.
- ✓ Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to manage your allergies.
- ✓ Take your asthma medicines as prescribed and follow your asthma action plan.
- ✓ Keeping regular follow-up with your asthma specialist and primary care provider.

Healthcare Provider's Contact Number:

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Resources:

American Thoracic Society

- www.thoracic.org/patients

Centers for Disease Control (CDC)

- <https://www.cdc.gov/asthma/triggers.html>

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

- <https://www.aafa.org/asthma-triggers-causes/>

American Lung Association

- <https://www.lung.org/lung-health-and-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/asthma/living-with-asthma/managing-asthma/reduce-asthma-triggers.html>

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