Controlling Allergy and Asthma Triggers  

By Debra Yemenijian

Allergies affect more than 50 million Americans each year, and asthma affects about 25 million, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology. By controlling your environment and avoiding those substances that invite coughing, wheezing and sneezing, you can take the first step toward effectively managing your symptoms at home and on the job.

AROUND THE HOUSE

Dust mites, cockroaches, animals, mold and cigarette smoke all contribute to the exacerbation of asthma and allergies. House dust mites are found in 99 percent of American homes, and cat and dog antigens are found in all homes, even if a home has no resident pets. Additionally, mold spores and cockroach antigens are found frequently.

Once you discover the source of your allergies and asthma, keep a record of your symptoms and the plants, animals, foods or chemicals that seem to trigger them.

Here are some things you can do at home to make you more comfortable:

• Wash bed sheets weekly in hot water.
• Dust your home twice a week, and vacuum regularly. You can use tannic acid, a protein-denaturing agent, to reduce allergen levels in house dust.
• Clean your shower or bathtub regularly, and check the shower curtain for mold growth.
• If you have pets, keep them clean by bathing them once a week. If possible, keep pets outside, and try to keep them away from your face.
• Mow the lawn frequently to limit the amount of pollen released. However, avoid outdoor activities on windy days and when trees, flowers and weeds are in bloom. If you need to work outside, wear a filter mask.
• Avoid smoke from cigarettes, fireplaces, barbecues and burning leaves.
• Replace carpets with alternative flooring to prevent the buildup of dust and mold.
• Use an air conditioner to remove mold spores from the air. You also may want to use an air purifier with a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter.
• Keep your house well ventilated and dry. Humidity should be kept below 50 percent to prevent mold growth.

ON THE JOB

Hundreds of jobs involve exposure to substances that can trigger allergies or lead to occupational asthma. At your office or job site, you might be exposed to the following triggers: animal dander, fumes, insulation and packaging materials, mites and other insects, and paints. Latex also has become one of the most common causes of occupational allergy and asthma.

Occupational asthma usually is reversible, but continued exposure to triggers can cause permanent lung damage. In time, it can cause asthma-like symptoms to occur outside of work when a person is exposed to smoke, household dust and other ordinary irritants.

Industries whose employees have a heightened exposure to triggers can take measures to diminish or eliminate the amount of dangerous substances in the air or decrease the number of workers exposed to it. Employers can offer some of the following steps:

• Enclose open operations that expel irritants into the surroundings. If this isn’t possible, employees can look into having their workspaces moved.
• Monitor the air and perform spot checks on workers and their surroundings periodically.
• Provide disposable gloves, uniforms and masks with cartridge filters to workers who are exposed to harmful substances.
• Additionally, regular medical screening of employees in these environments can help doctors diagnose allergies or asthma before a worker’s quality of life is adversely affected by symptoms. Medications and breathing aids also can be prescribed for workers unable to prevent occasional exposure.

Editor’s note: Information adapted from the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, the Journal of the American Medical Association, the American College of Asthma, Allergy and Immunology, and Medscape General Medicine.

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