

Steps to Allergy-Proof Your Home

Over 40 million Americans suffer from allergies. If you or your child has allergies or asthma, you already know that many things can bring on, or “trigger” an asthma flare or episode. Some things that trigger asthma attacks are called allergens. Some people get symptoms from only one allergen, like dust mites. For other people, more than one kind of allergen can trigger an episode.

Step 1: Allergen-Control Plan

1. Work with your regular doctor to find out which allergens affect your child or you the most. If asthma flares happen a lot, your doctor may suggest medication or life style changes. Keep an asthma diary.
2. Concentrate on controlling the allergens.
3. Start with the easiest, least expensive ways, like cleaning. Set up your cleaning plan one room at a time, beginning with where the allergy-sufferer sleeps.

Step 2: Bedrooms

Every home has dust mites. You can't see them but they are there. They feed on our skin flakes, as we shed about two pounds each year. We spend about a third of our lives in bed so most dust mites are in our pillows, bedding and bedroom carpets. You can control them by keeping bedding clean and controlling dust. Dust mites in the bedroom are a trigger for people with allergies and asthma.

Use special dust mite-proof covers to keep dust mites from getting into pillows. They are sometimes called “allergen-impermeable”. If you don't use covers, wash pillows at least 1 time every two weeks in very hot water, and replace every year.

Mattresses should be cleaned every six months by a professional cleaner using an extraction method to reduce allergens. A professional cleaner can also apply a neutralizing spray to reduce allergen irritants between regular cleaning. Regular cleaning of carpets and upholstery should be part of your allergen-control plan.

Step 3: Living Areas

When children play and crawl on the floor, they breathe in allergens. Keep carpet, furniture and curtains as clean as possible. All home furnishings should be professionally cleaned on a regular basis. Cleaning frequency is based on the number of people in your home, if you have pets or smokers and the amount of outside dust and pollution.

When you vacuum, some of the allergens trapped in carpets and upholstery are thrown into the air. Use a vacuum that has a HEPA (99.7% efficient) filter and/or exhaust filter; or use a special bag that holds allergens inside the bag. Vacuum at least once a week or more frequently if you have a pet. Empty the bag when it's half full (or throw it away if it's disposable). An upright vacuum or a canister with a powered head is best for carpet. A canister vacuum without a powered nozzle is fine for cleaning upholstery, draperies, blinds and light dusting.

Step 4: Bathroom

Mold and mildew are tiny plants that grow where it's warm and damp-like in the shower. They release invisible “spores” into the air. The floating spores trigger allergy and asthma episodes. And wherever they land, the spores start growing new mold.

Warmth + Moisture = Mold

Mold can also grow on appliances – like air conditioners, dehumidifiers and humidifiers. Follow manufacturer's instructions to change filters and clean regularly.

Step 5: Air Handling System

Most homes and offices use a central heating, ventilation and air conditioning system (HVAC). Other homes may have central heating but use wall unit air conditioners. All heating and cooling systems should be cleaned on a regular basis. Air duct systems can hold dust, pollen, animal dander, dust mite allergens and mold spores. Condensation in the air conditioning system, particularly during the summer, can collect and be a breeding ground for mold. Make sure system drip pans are cleaned and moisture is draining properly.

Step 6: Clutter Plan

Want to save time and reduce allergens? Then get rid of clutter! Having lots of stuff around does more than clutter a room. It makes cleaning harder and gives places for dust and other allergens to collect. Follow these simple steps to reduce clutter.

1. Sort It Out. Start with a bedroom and take everything out of the closet, dressers, shelves, and under the bed. Put stuff in separate piles: clothes, shoes, toys, books, school supplies, sports equipment, etc. Work with your children to pick the toys and belongings that are most important, and separate those they don't use any more.
2. Give It A Home. Keep similar items together so that children know where to find things. For example, keep school supplies near the desk or table where your children do homework; store videos by the VCR; toys in the play area, etc.
3. Cover It. Put items inside drawers, closets, covered boxes or plastic containers so dust can't collect on them. Put labels on containers to show where things belong. Have your children write or draw labels.
4. Use It. Review the "clutter plan" with your children. Remind them that controlling clutter may help reduce asthma attacks. Have them try to put one thing back before getting out something else. Or, schedule 5 minutes of clean-up time every night.

Step 7: Water Incursion

If you have water damage from broken pipes, leaks or rain coming into your home – it must be treated immediately! Steps need to be taken to dry the structure and its contents.

When walls, flooring, carpets or parts of your home stay wet for longer than 24 hours, mold and bacteria will grow. This can result in the release of severe allergens into your home.

Do not delay in immediately contacting your insurance company whenever you have the unfortunate event of water damage.

Keep the name and number of your insurance agent near your phone in the event of water damage.

Contact a plumber to immediately stop the flow of water from a broken pipe.

Turn off electricity at the main box before entering a room with standing water and electric appliances.

Step 8: Cleaning with Allergies or Asthma

Since many allergens float in the air, they are hard to avoid. Cleaning (like dusting and vacuuming) can stir up the air and the allergens in it. Just like other particles in the air, sometimes cleaning products can "trigger" an asthma attack. But it's still important to clean. If you don't, dust, mold and other allergens will build up, making asthma symptoms worse.

If you have allergies or asthma, here are some important tips:

Read and follow label directions on cleaning products. The label directions give the proper amount of product to use, how to use the product and any special safety advise.

If you use spray products, spray the cleaner on a cloth or sponge first instead of on the surface.

Break your cleaning into small tasks. Spread it out over several days instead of doing it all at once.

Clean in a "well-ventilated" area – open a door and a window or turn on an exhaust fan. Leave the room when you are done cleaning and allow the room to air out. Try using cleaning products that have no scent or are perfume free. Try different products to find the ones that work best for you. Use cleaning products that are "green" or environmentally safe. Ones without hazardous ingredients including VOC's. If your asthma is severe, have someone else do the cleaning. Try to leave home when the cleaning is being done. If you must do the cleaning yourself, wear a mask. Have asthmatic children leave the room when cleaning is being done. Don't ask children with asthma to dust or vacuum. Have them do other chores like washing dishes, taking out the trash, etc.