

My Home is Making Me Sneeze!

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Cabin fever is spreading across New England as spring approaches. While we remain indoors as the snow melts away, we can take the opportunity to motivate for a good house cleaning. The home itself can be a trigger for allergies, asthma and sinusitis. Let's take a look at the most common home allergens, and how best to prevent and respond to the consequences of exposure.

Home allergens include dust mites, pet dander and excretions, and smoke and soot from a wood-burning stove. In contrast to seasonal allergies to environmental pollens and spores, household allergies can be perennial, or year-round.

The most common symptoms you may exhibit are listed below and indicate *allergic rhinitis*:

- runny or stuffy nose
- itchy or watery eyes
- sneezing

If you have a previous diagnosis of *asthma*, home allergens may trigger these symptoms:

- wheezing
- coughing
- chest tightness
- breathlessness

Chronic exposure to allergens may also cause *sinusitis*:

- stuffy nose
- difficulty breathing through the nose
- facial pain or pressure over sinuses

The best way to prevent household allergies is to make some adjustments to your home's terrain, as well as to keep up with dusting and vacuuming. Here is a list of things you can do at home:

- Do not use carpeting or upholstered furniture, especially in the bedroom.
- Avoid putting decorative items that collect dust out on surfaces.
- If you use rugs, wash them weekly in hot water.
- Do not use blinds. Instead use washable curtains.
- Wash bedding, including comforter, weekly in hot water.
- Use a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter.
- Use a vacuum cleaner with a HEPA filter once or twice weekly while wearing a mask.
- Steam clean carpets.
- Put allergen-proof covers on bedding.

In order to prevent mold growth, keep the house dry:

- Use a dehumidifier to keep the house dry if humidity is a problem.
- Use ventilation systems in the bathroom, kitchen and with the clothes dryer.
- Clean the bathroom at least once every two weeks.
- Do not store wood inside the home.

- Do not use carpeting over concrete.
- Check for plumbing leaks.

Unfortunately, if you experience symptoms around pets, the best remedy is to remove the pet from the home. Here are a few tips in order to prevent an allergic reaction to animal dander, urine and feces while keeping the pet in the home:

- Keep the pet only in a specific area of the home, and never in the bedroom.
- Clean the area where the pet is kept weekly, including cages and items with fabrics that have come into contact with the pet. Use a mask and gloves.
- Do not allow pets on carpets or upholstered furniture.
- Use a mask and gloves when coming into contact with the pet's urine and feces.

Also, if you experience symptoms as a result of being in contact with a wood-burning stove, the best remedy is to remove the stove from the home. Consider using a pellet stove instead. If you have allergies to mold or pollen, it is important to keep in mind that the wood may be contaminated with these substances that may in turn cause your symptoms. Here are a few tips on maintenance of your wood stove:

- Do not use green wood.
- Use dry wood.
- Do not use chemicals.
- Ensure that the damper is open and clear.
- Professionally clean your wood stove twice annually.
- Refer to the EPA's list of wood stove particulate emissions by visiting www.epa.gov.

In addition to adopting conscientious behavior around the home to ameliorate your reaction to home allergens, here are some suggestions for the **treatment of allergic rhinitis and sinusitis**:

- Keep your immune system healthy by avoiding sugar, refined and processed foods, dairy products and alcohol.
- Eat a healthy diet high in multi-colored vegetables.
- Drink 8-10 glasses of water each day.
- Consult with your health care provider regarding a suggested dosage of:
 - 500mg of Vitamin C with bioflavonoids twice daily in order to boost your immune system and decrease inflammation.
 - Two grams of fish oil daily to decrease inflammation.
- Nasal irrigation: Use a neti pot in order to remove allergens from your nasal passages. Be sure to read instructions first.
- Steam inhalation: You may add one drop of eucalyptus essential oil to a bowl of boiling water.
- Take time to de-stress by practicing meditation, prayer, yoga, qi gong or an activity of your choice, in order to give your body the opportunity to heal.

If you notice that you are wheezing or having trouble breathing, it is recommended that you contact your physician.