



## 'Tis the Season

For people with asthma and allergies, the holidays present health challenges unique to the winter season. Busier-than-usual social schedules, chilly weather, and cherished family customs combine to make staying healthy a daily priority for asthma and allergy sufferers.

Surviving and enjoying the holidays is easier when you plan ahead and take preventive action. Here are some tips to help you combat potential holiday hazards so that you will look back on this season with joy instead of relief.

### **Holiday Indulgence?**

From Halloween through New Year's day, the holidays are fraught with foods to be avoided by people with food allergies. Children, especially, need to be protected from certain candies and foods that cause allergic reactions. Inform family members and friends of special diet restrictions so that there will be plenty of "safe" foods to eat at holiday get-togethers. Prepare allergy-free snacks and meals in advance; freeze or store as much as possible, so that hectic work and school schedules do not erode healthy eating habits.

Eating away from home requires advance planning to prevent potential allergic reactions. Take the time to check restaurant menus before eating out; call the hostess or manager and have them help you identify menu items the allergic person can safely eat. Offer to bring allergen-free dishes that compliment meals hosted by friends or relatives to ensure that everyone enjoys these special events.

If you or a family member are predisposed to food allergies, have an epinephrine injection kit (EpiPen) with you at all times because this busy season includes events which almost always feature food too tempting to resist.

### **When the Weather Outside is Frightful**

Mold can be less than delightful. From raking wet leaves to choosing logs for the fireplace, allergy sufferers need to be prepared. Remove wet dirt and leaves from around the foundation and gutters of your house to prevent outdoor mold from accumulating near windows and doors. Stack all firewood outside, bringing new logs in only for immediate use in your fireplace or wood burning stove.

Ideally, someone without outdoor mold allergy should perform outdoor activities where mold poses a threat. If you have to perform these chores, be sure to dress appropriately (i.e., wearing protective items such as gloves, face mask, etc.) and keep preventive and/or treatment medication readily available.

Mold can flourish indoors if the humidity is too high. When the heat is on, check humidity levels in those rooms where you will spend most of your time, including bathrooms and basement living areas. Keep indoor humidity to below 50% as long as you're comfortable and allergy symptoms are minimal. Consider a dehumidifier, if necessary.

The cold, too, can be less than delightful for people with asthma. Block brisk winter winds from your face with a scarf or muffler. If these do not protect against asthma episodes, consider buying a warmer mask, available at most medical supply stores.

If you regularly work, play, or exercise outdoors, you may need medication to prevent asthma induced by cold weather activity. With the help of your physician, identify the best preventive medication for your condition and have an adequate supply on hand. Use this preventive medication at least 15-30 minutes before heading outdoors.

### **Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire...**

And unseen particles nipping at your nose, eyes, and throat...Clean your chimney before that first holiday fire and be sure the fireplace flue works properly. Check fireplace vents and keep fireplace doors closed to eliminate as much smoke and particulates as possible. Replace fireplace screen with a door.

If you use a wood-burning stove, talk with your allergist or family physician about ways to reduce irritants caused by smoldering embers and other combustible materials.

### **Dusty Decor**

Decorations and ornaments stored in the attic, basement, or garage can become coated with dust. Proper storage is the key to making future festivities fun instead of frustrating. Thoroughly clean and dry all decorations, seal them in plastic bags, and store the bagged items in airtight containers or clean boxes.

If you are extremely sensitive to dust, consider buying a dust face mask to wear over your nose and mouth. For about \$15-20, a very good mask can be purchased from most medical supply stores (make sure it fits firmly around your face).

Heating vents can blow accumulated dust and debris throughout your home. Clean or replace filters in your furnace before turning your home heating system on. Pay special attention to any attached humidifiers. Placing a nonflammable filtering material (such as several layers of cheesecloth) over heating vents can help catch dust particles. Check and replace such homemade filters frequently.

Inspect the filters in portable air cleaners you plan to use and clean or replace them as necessary. Running air cleaners at the highest setting during winter months can help reduce allergic reactions to indoor dust and mold.

## **'O Christmas Tree!**

If a live evergreen tree is a tradition you cannot live without, the following tips should help make this year's tree a treasure rather than trouble. Wipe the trunk thoroughly with a solution of lukewarm water and diluted bleach (1 part bleach to 20 parts water) to eliminate any mold. Some evergreens, particularly junipers and cedar, may be pollinating even in the winter – look for a yellowish tinge on the trunk and needles. Before bringing the tree inside, use a leaf blower (in a well ventilated area away from the house or garage) to remove visible pollen grains.

Artificial Christmas trees are suitable substitutes for live trees as long as they're not coated with sprayed-on "snow". Such additions (including pine-scented sprays or oils) can aggravate asthmatic or allergic symptoms in some people.

## **Over the River and Through the Woods...**

When visiting family or friends, be prepared for possible reactions to everything, from pets to food to perfume. Never leave home without the appropriate medication(s), equipment, and a written action plan so that the proper steps can be taken in case of emergency.

## **Common "Sense" of the Season**

Limit (or eliminate) scented candles, potpourri, air fresheners, plant arrangements, and frequent pungent holiday baking that can cause discomfort for asthmatics or those sensitive to strong odors.

\*\* Adapted from the Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America