

# The Asthma & Allergy Center



## Spring cleaning: It's time to clean up indoor allergens

For the more than 40 million people throughout the country who suffer from indoor allergies, spring cleaning can be an important step to take in order to reduce allergy symptoms, according to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology (AAAAI). Spring cleaning takes some time and effort, but it will produce an indoor environment that is less allergenic, easier to clean and healthier for the whole family.

### Symptoms of indoor allergies

Indoor allergy sufferers will often wheeze, sneeze, cough and hack their way through the winter months, thinking they have a chronic cold. In actuality, they are probably reacting to indoor allergens. Some symptoms between a cold and allergies are similar, such as sneezing and a stuffy or runny nose. But, if your symptoms are also accompanied with a fever, sore throat, colored nasal discharge, and aches and pains, then you probably have a cold. With allergies, there is never a fever, the nasal discharge is clear, and eyes may become red and itchy. Furthermore, while a cold usually lasts about a week, allergies can last all year.

### Prevention of common indoor allergens

The key is to focus on sites where allergens accumulate. The term “allergen” refers to any substance that can trigger an allergic response. First, you must know which allergens or irritants in your home provoke your symptoms. Common allergens and some ways to prevent them include:

**Dust mites:** These thrive in house dust, which is composed of plant and animal material. Their droppings are the most common trigger of perennial allergy and asthma symptoms.

- Change and clean cooling and heating system filters once a month.
- Have your home, car and office vacuumed and dusted frequently.
- Wash blankets and bedspreads weekly and sheets and pillowcases more often. Be sure that the water is above 120° degrees.
- Try to regularly wash your curtains and throw rugs.

**Molds:** These are microscopic fungi. Their spores float in the air like pollen and are present throughout the year in many states. Molds can be found indoors in attics, basements, bathrooms, refrigerators and other food storage areas, garbage containers, carpets and upholstery.

- Keep bathroom and kitchen surfaces dry, fix leaky plumbing and seal cracks where water can seep in to avoid mold buildup.
- Never put carpeting on concrete or damp floors, and avoid storing clothes, papers or other items in damp areas.
- Reduce humidity in damp areas by using a dehumidifier. Clean dehumidifiers once a week.
- All rooms, especially basements, bathrooms and kitchens, require ventilation and consistent cleaning to deter mold and mildew growth. Use a cleaning solution containing 5% bleach and a small amount of detergent.

**Pets:** People are not allergic to their pets' hair, but to a protein found in the saliva, dander (dead skin flakes) or urine of an animal with fur. These proteins are carried in the air on small, invisible particles and can trigger allergy symptoms.

- If you have a cat or dog, it might help reduce household allergens by washing your pet once a week.
- Do not sleep with your pet. Sleeping with your pet, long or short-haired, greatly increases the amount of contact with unwanted allergens.
- Vacuum and mop your floors regularly to remove excess animal dander.

**Cockroaches:** These live in warm, tropical climates, but various species dwell in the offices and homes of humans living in various climates. A protein found in their droppings can trigger allergy and asthma symptoms.

- Frequently remove all household food wastes, including garbage and recyclables. Food should be stored in sealed containers.
- Wash dishes immediately after use in hot, soapy water, and clean under stoves, refrigerators or toasters where loose crumbs can accumulate. Wipe off the stove top and clean other kitchen surfaces and cupboards regularly.
- Consider a professional exterminator to eliminate cockroaches.
- Thoroughly and frequently clean to remove dust and cockroach byproducts.

**When should you see an allergist/immunologist?**

By conducting a thorough history of your health and performing allergy tests, if needed, an Asthma and Allergy Center Clinician can help you determine which indoor allergens provoke your symptoms. Environmental control measures differ for dust mites, animal allergens, cockroaches and molds, but your Asthma and Allergy Center Clinician can help you determine ways to reduce your exposure to these allergens. To relieve your symptoms, your Asthma and Allergy Center Clinician may also prescribe appropriate medications, such as antihistamines, decongestants or asthma medications and allergy vaccine therapy (immunotherapy).