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Allergy and Clinical Immunology

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Dust Mite Avoidance Measures

Dust mites are microscopic bugs that feed on shed human skin. They are therefore found in great abundance where we live. The dust mites excrete proteins that are harmful allergens to people.

Dust mites live in mattresses, pillows, bedding and carpets. Dust mites enjoy environments that are humid, warm, dark and contain plenty of shed skin. There are hundreds of thousands of dust mites living in our beds! Continuous exposure to dust mites through the night can lead to significant symptoms for allergy sufferers.

The first step in treating allergies is to avoid what you are allergic to. As we spend a third of our life in the bedroom, this is the area where dust mite avoidance measures should be undertaken. The following are effective ways of reducing your dust mite exposure. The first 12 tips are the most important.

1. Obtain dust mite mattress covers. These are special covers, which completely encase the mattress and place a barrier between you and the dust mites. Air permeable covers are more comfortable (but more expensive) and can be used for the mattress. Less expensive vinyl covers can be used on the box spring. Dust mite covers can also be obtained for pillows. Covers should be washed or wiped with a damp cloth weekly. Covers can be obtained from Quorum Pharmaceuticals (Zip & Block Encasing) sold at pharmacies and department stores, or Allergy Canada Ltd (1-905-763-6642; website: www.allergycanada.com).
2. Wash all bedding (sheets, pillowcases) in hot water (130 F / 55 C) weekly.
3. Obtain washable pillows, comforter and blankets and wash them in hot water once a month.
4. Avoid feather pillows and down comforters as they contain enormous amount of dust mites and cannot be washed regularly.
5. Hardwood, linoleum or tile floors are far superior to carpets. Smooth floors should be cleaned with a damp mop regularly.
6. There is no effective method to free carpets of dust mites. In general vacuum cleaners pick up visible rather than invisible or allergic dust. The best vacuum style is a central vacuum which vents to the garage or outdoors. Vacuum cleaners with a HEPA filter may provide some benefit. Be careful: allergy sufferers are seen as a large and profitable market by many vacuum manufactures, whose claims are often exaggerated. As dust becomes aerosolized with vacuuming, it is advisable to wear a mask and keep windows open. Preferably someone not allergic to dust mites should vacuum.
7. Kill dust mites in loose rugs by washing, leaving in direct sunlight (3 hours) or freezing overnight (winter)
8. Remove dust collecting objects from the bedroom: books, bookshelves, upholstered furniture, fabric curtains, stuffed toys and items under the bed.
9. Stuffed toys can be washed in hot water or kept overnight in the freezer to reduce dust mites levels.
10. Hard surfaces and window blinds should be cleaned with a damp cloth to minimize airborne dust.
11. No smoking or second-hand smoke exposure. Smoke can exacerbate allergic symptoms.
12. Humidity above 50% promotes dust mite growth. Humidity below 30% leads to nasal dryness. Ideal humidity is 30% – 40%. Humidity is measured by a hygrometer, which can be obtained from department or hardware stores.
13. Dust mite chemical cleaners (acaricides or denaturants) destroy surface dust mites temporarily. Their usefulness to provide long-term control is no longer supported.
14. Air cleaners provide some benefit but are not a substitute for the above mentioned avoidance measures. Central air cleaners include electrostatic air cleaners (expensive) and 3M Filtrete™ filter (less expensive). The only reliable portable air cleaner is a HEPA filter type. Filters must be cleaned or replaced regularly to be effective.
15. Dust mites do not live in ducts. It is not necessary to routinely clean ducts.