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Allergen Avoidance

Millions of Americans have allergies, an unusual sensitivity to substances that are normally harmless. The symptoms most often associated with allergies are sneezing, runny nose, nasal congestion, watery and itchy eyes, and a scratchy throat.

Your doctor might suggest medication to treat your allergies in addition to minimizing contact with the allergens you're sensitive to. Here are some avoidance tips from common allergens.

Pollen Avoidance

Trees: Pollens are the fertilizing agents of trees, weeds, and grasses. Most trees in the United States that produce pollen associated with allergies or "hay fever" pollinate at various periods throughout the year. Most pollen is invisible to the eye and is capable of being carried through the air for great distances.

Weeds and Grasses: If you are allergic to weed and grass pollen, it might be useful to obtain charts showing what the weed or grass looks like. Of those plants grow around your house, you may find some relief of your allergy symptoms by having the plants removed. The most problematical pollen is ragweed, which spreads an abundance of pollen in the air in late summer and early fall. Some grasses pollinate during much of the year and in the absence of frost, may cause "hay fever" symptoms on a nearly year-round basis.

Pollen Tips:

- Avoid, if you can, going outside on a day when the pollen count is high such as a dry, windy day. Pollen is at its highest levels in late evening and early morning.
- Check the weather network and newspaper for forecasts on local pollen counts.
- Keep the windows closed and use air conditioners when possible.
- Air conditioning will decrease indoor pollen counts because it re-circulates indoor air instead of outside air that carries pollen.
- Have someone kill weeds by cutting them or using weed killers.
- Avoid plants related to ragweed including zinnias, chrysanthemums, marigolds, dahlias, and sunflowers.
- Use HEPA filters in the home. HEPA air filters and vacuum cleaners are available in most retail stores. HEPA stands for High Efficiency Particulate Arrester. This type of air filter is designed to absorb most particles floating in the air and keep vacuumed dust from escaping from the vacuum cleaner back into the air.

Animal Dander Avoidance

Animal dander is a mix of skin flakes and fur or hair shed from pets. Animal dander and not the hair specifically, cause allergy symptoms in people allergic to cats and/or dogs. People allergic to cats and/or dogs may develop allergy symptoms by coming into contact with the pet's saliva or urine. If someone is allergic to one kind of animal, he or she may develop an allergy to other animals.

If you are allergic to an animal's dander, then finding a new home for the pet can provide the best means of reducing or eliminating allergy symptoms associated with cats and dogs. However, your doctor recognizes that pets are often considered "family members" and parting with the pet can be difficult. In these situations, the following measures may help reduce exposure to animal dander:

Animal Tips:

- Never let the pet into your bedroom.
- Keep the pet outside as much as possible and prevent the allergy sufferer from bathing the pet.
- Professional cleaning of carpets and air ducts is usually required to remove animal dander even after the pet has been removed from the home.
- If you are going to visit someone else's home where there is a pet, consider taking non-sedating antihistamines (as recommended by your doctor) before visiting.
- Live animals are not the only source of allergies. Clothing made of cashmere, animal hair, or mohair can trigger an allergic reaction, as well as animal hair-stuffed chairs, sofas, toys, and down-stuffed pillows. Use Dacron-filled pillows and comforters instead of foam rubber (foam rubber encourages the growth of mold).

Mold Avoidance

Molds can exist outside and inside of the home. Molds give off spores that get into the air and when inhaled by someone allergic to them, can produce allergic symptoms such as a runny or stuffy nose, coughing, or itchy, watery eyes.

Mold spores can be inhaled outdoors while cutting grass, raking leaves, or hiking in the woods. Outdoor mold counts usually peak during summer months although rainy or damp weather often causes molds to thrive. Dry, windy days can carry mold spores far distances.

Indoor mold (also known as "mildew") can release mold spores throughout the year. Inside the home, molds can be found in the bathroom, basements, in dried flowers and potted plants, air conditioners, dehumidifiers, leather goods, and in stored goods.

Mold Tips:

- Reducing excess dampness in the house is a prime goal in controlling mold.
- Reduce the amount of house dust in your home. House dust carries mold.
- Wash window ledges and shower stalls with chlorine bleach or Lysol at least once every three months.
- Use mold-resistant paints to cover walls in unfinished basements.
- Keep houseplants to a minimum or use solutions (available at nurseries) that you can mix with your potting soil to inhibit the growth of mold.
- Clean furnace filters, air conditioners, dehumidifiers, and vaporizers frequently, to prevent mold build-up.
- Wallpaper is a prime location for mold, especially in the bathroom. If newly papering walls, add borax or boric acid to the paste to slow down the growth of mold.
- Dry damp clothes promptly.
- Vent dryers to the outside to prevent build up of moisture.
- Spread out towels and the shower curtain as often as possible so that they will dry promptly.
- Discard damp piles of papers, carpeting, and old furniture.
- Replace old pillows and bedding.
- Check attics and crawl spaces for mold and moisture.

House Dust Mite Avoidance

House dust is a mixture of many kinds of particles that travel in the air. House dust typically consists of dust mites that are invisible creatures that feed on dead skin flakes. Dust mites are the single most important contributors in "triggering" allergic symptoms. Allergic symptoms include itching, red eyes or an itchy, runny, stuffy nose and coughing. In order to minimize your exposure to house dust mites, you should consider the following:

Dust Mite Tips:

- Keep the bedroom clean. You can spend over a third of your life in the bedroom so focus on efforts to improve your environment. Try using wooden or linoleum flooring and keep your bed away from air vents. Everything in the room should be washable including bedding, rugs, and foam mattresses. Use pillows made of Dacron or foam rather than using pillows made from feathers. Vacuum mattresses and enclose them in a protective dust mite cover. Use synthetic blankets.
- Avoid being present during house cleaning if possible or wear an appropriate mask if it is necessary for you to clean the house. Clean rooms with a damp dust cloth twice a week.
- Avoid overstuffed furniture or if you have it then do not sit on it.
- Eliminate dust catchers and avoid clutter.
- Replace old carpets and rugs if possible. If you intend to keep your carpet or if it is new, you can reduce allergens in your carpets by applying a solution that helps keep down the formation of dust in the carpeting.
- Use only washable window curtains made of cotton or polyester. Venetian blinds are not recommended because of the tendency to accumulate dust.
- Furnaces should be serviced regularly by having ducts cleaned and filters replaced.
- Use HEPA air filters and vacuum cleaners. HEPA stands for High Efficiency Particulate Arrester. This type of filter is designed to absorb most particles floating in the air. A HEPA vacuum prevents vacuumed dust from escaping from the vacuum back into the air.