

Oh, to be allergy free

At home, room by room—valuable tips to manage allergy and asthma triggers

Story: Tanja Kern

FROM SEEMINGLY INNOCUOUS things, such as blossoms and kittens, to the more obvious dust and mold, allergens can wreak havoc on daily living.

If you're one of the more than 70 million Americans sick of taking allergy pills and inhalers and tired of using neti pots and nasal sprays, it's time to double down on your efforts to get rid of the allergens at the source: your home.

While many think of home as a place to escape allergens, what may be closer to reality is that your home's shell houses a lively breeding ground of allergy and asthma triggers—dust mites, mold, pet dander, fumes, odor, to name a few.

Allergy doctors agree that controlling allergens in your environment should be your first line of defense against allergies. After all, reducing or eliminating irritants is usually natural, safe, and often an extremely effective preventative strategy.

"A house built with materials that are easy to clean and less likely to contain irritants, such as hard-surface floors or non-toxic paint, may have a positive impact on a family, especially one dealing with asthma," says Carter Oosterhouse, HGTV host and carpenter, who teamed up with the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America to help raise awareness about how homes can trigger asthma.

Common allergens in the home include dust mites, animal allergens (pet dander, saliva, skin flakes, and urine), mold spores, cockroach particles, and dust. Others to consider are perfumes and hair products, laundry detergents, food products, and pollens that work their way indoors. As these things are inhaled or contact the eyes or even the skin, they can cause allergic reactions, such as stuffy or runny noses, itchy eyes, rashes, and breathing difficulties.

Short of living in a bubble, what's one to do? Here are some room-by-room tips that will help you reduce the allergy triggers in your home.



1 Whole house tips

The smell of new paint is not only irritating, but it can actually be harmful. Paints, stains, and other finishes commonly used in the home contain chemicals, such as formaldehyde, that can release irritants into your home's air for months after use. Choose a low-VOC (volatile organic compound) paint, which may reduce the amount of chemicals released.

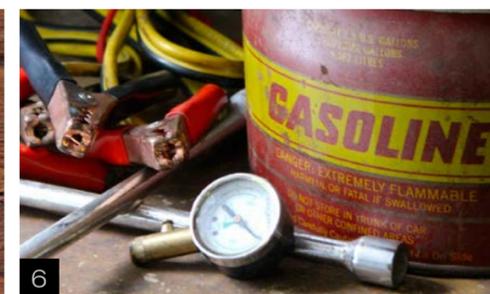
Candles and plug-in air fresheners may seem like a great way to freshen up your home, but they can be harmful. "The added scent can set off all sorts of reactions," says Blake Connoy, managing director of Helping, an online resource for home cleaners. "Opt for unscented products, and clean your home with natural ingredients, such as vinegar, lemons, and baking soda."

Use HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filters in the air-conditioning system and change the filter regularly.



Dust mites thrive in temperatures at or above 70 degrees Fahrenheit and humidity of 75 to 80 percent. So, use your air conditioner to keep the humidity at about 50 percent. Mold likes moisture, and dust and pollen are easily stirred in dry air. Look for dehumidifiers that come with washable filters. Empty and clean them regularly or you'll grow

more mold than you destroy. Vacuum twice weekly with a vacuum that has a HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) or small-particle filter, and be sure to change the unit's filter regularly. Damp-mop hard surfaces regularly. Dander, saliva, and urine from animals can trigger allergic reactions. Thoroughly clean your home, ban pets from upholstered furniture, and keep your pet in another room while visitors are present.



2 Entryway

Shoes can carry bacteria, as well as other environmental allergens and toxins. "Imagine walking on the sidewalk where animals, insects, and chemicals have been dropped," says allergist Warner Carr, a spokesperson for the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology who practices in Mission Viejo, California.

3 Kitchen

Avoid having piles of dirty dishes—to ward off bugs, critters, and mold growth. Cockroaches love to feast on leftover food, so empty garbage and recycling bins regularly.

4 Living room

Cut the dust by reducing the number of knickknacks, magazines, and other

dust catchers that you don't use or enjoy. Also, avoid decorating with straw baskets and dried flower arrangements, which are huge dust collectors.

Choose furniture with smooth, nonporous surfaces, such as leather. Airing out new furniture, whether it's upholstered, varnished, or painted, provides a natural way for the chemical fumes to dissipate on their own. Replace heavy curtains and blinds with ones that are washable.

5 Bedroom

Choose hard-surface flooring instead of carpeting, especially in the bedroom. Dust mites, dirt, and mold can hide in carpets and are difficult to clean. Hardwood, vinyl, tile, and linoleum floor coverings are easier to keep dust mites and mold at bay.

Cover mattresses and pillows with

removable allergen-resistant coverings. "The protective covers prevent dust mites from getting into the mattress or pillow," Carr says. "In addition, [the covers] prevent exposure from the dust mites already there. However, they may still accumulate if you don't wash, dust, and clean on a regular basis.

"Avoid bedding that is stuffed with feathers, down, or foam rubber, and wash pillows and blankets on a schedule. Washing pillows is the key to maintaining control," Carr says. "You must wash in hot water at least once a week." He doesn't recommend any type of chemical cleaner.

6 Bathroom

Make sure ventilation fans are routed to the outside, and run them for 30 minutes after every shower or bath. Clean regularly

with a nontoxic cleaner and scrub away mold on fixtures, pipes, and surfaces.

7 Garage

Don't store chemicals like gasoline and insecticides in the garage if the garage is attached to the home. The fumes can make their way into the house. Avoid revving your engine in the garage, where exhaust fumes can bother inhabitants.

Photography: James Fanucchi; courtesy participating product manufacturers

RESOURCES

American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology
acaai.org

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America
aafa.org

Tools to ward off allergens

A Awair Smart Air Quality Monitor

The Awair uses sensors to keep track of the air around you, including the temperature, humidity, carbon dioxide, toxic chemicals, and dust. Awair alerts of poor air quality (with Awair analytics), and makes recommendations to help keep your indoor environment pleasant and healthy. \$169; [Amazon.com](#)

B Dyson V6 Absolute

This cordless vacuum comes equipped with two cleaner heads. Invented for hard floors, the soft-roller cleaner head



removes large debris and fine dust simultaneously. The direct-drive cleaner head provides 75 percent more power than the Dyson V6 vacuum. HEPA filtration captures allergens and expels cleaner air. Extra Dyson-engineered tools for homes with pets. \$599.99; [Dyson.com](#)



C Benjamin Moore Natura interior paint

Natura is a zero-VOC paint with zero emissions that provides both beautiful and durable long-lasting coverage. It was recently certified asthma and allergy friendly because it is scientifically proven to considerably



reduce exposure to allergens. "With zero emissions and no harsh fumes, Natura truly is an eco-friendly paint that delivers on performance and color integrity," says Chris Connelly, director of brand management at Benjamin Moore. \$56.99 per gallon; [Benjaminmoore.com](#)