

Filters Help, But Cleaning Makes Difference

AP Image

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POSTED: 4:41 pm CST December 18, 2007

Melissa Ford could not have stuffed animal toys as a child because of her allergy to dust mites. It was also hard for her to live with carpeting.

Growing up, the executive director of the Kansas City Chapter of the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America took allergy shots for seven years to fend off symptoms such as scratchy eyes, a runny nose and drainage.

My Family

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Ford no longer needs the shots, but she regularly takes steps around her house to reduce dust mites in order to keep her year-round allergy under control.

An estimated 50 million Americans -- one in five people -- suffer from some types of allergies. People have problems indoors and outdoors, from food and drugs, latex and insects. Some show up in the skin, others in the eyes, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

Eight out of 10 people in the United States are exposed to house dust mites, and six out of 10 are exposed to cat or dog dander, some of the most common allergies, the foundation says.

Fight Problems At Home

Ford said the steps people take toward allergy proofing their homes depend on how high of a concentration the allergies are in the home and how much it truly bothers them.

She vacuums her home regularly and uses a dehumidifier to ward off mold. She washes her bed linens in hot water with bleach once a week, has an allergen-reducing mattress and pillow covers and periodically vacuums the mattress.

Janice Nolen, assistant vice president of national policy and advocacy at the American Lung Association, said that simple things can be effective in reducing indoor allergens.

She said for a dust mite allergy, people should keep the humidity level in their home between 30 and 50 percent.

"It may require a dehumidifier, but it's probably the most effective thing in reducing dust mites," she said.

Mike Tringle, director of external affairs at the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, said dust mites are present in 90 percent of beds and pillows.

He said the majority of dust comes from dead human skin cells, dander and dirt that remain in the air all the time.

"The smaller the particles, the bigger the problem, because the deeper it goes into your lungs," he said. "The trick is, how do you minimize your exposure to these types of allergens?"

He said to use the right kind of vacuum, mite-resistant bedliners, and high-efficiency particulate air filters -- known as HEPA filters -- throughout the house and to patch leaks in pipes where moisture wants to thrive.

Stop The Source, Clear The Air

"The philosophy at the American Lung Association is that you control the source first," Nolen said.

She said the next step is adding ventilation to get allergens out of house.

"Only when you do those things then do you clean the air," she said.

Febreze Allergen Reducer spray reduces up to 75 percent of allergens from cats, dogs and dust mites, according to the product's Web site.

"We have no evidence that anything like that works," Nolen said. "Products like that cover odor. We have no evidence that they remove indoor air problems."

For bad smells, Nolen said the American Lung Association recommends stopping it. For example, the exhaust fan in a bathroom is better because it's much more effective than any fragrance.

For home heating and cooling systems, Nolen recommends a filter with minimum efficiency reporting value -- known as a MERV -- with a rating of 11 or better. She said pleated systems help reduce particles in the air.

"It's only going to address airborne allergens," she said. "They can remove particles. There's no evidence they can improve health."

She said part of the challenge is that allergens such as pet dander and pollen aren't airborne. She pointed out that air conditioning can help filter out pollen allergens.

Pets And Roaches

Nolen said the most effective thing for many people is to keep pets outdoors. If you must have a cat or dog indoors, do not let it in the bedroom.

"There's no such thing as a non-allergenic cat or dog," she said.

Cockroaches might not always be visible in a home, but they can trigger allergies.

"People are highly allergic to cockroach body parts and fecal remains," Nolen said.

She suggested keeping garbage covered and making sure food is not left out. If you notice roaches coming from an outside source, use a bait source to get rid of them.

Mold Triggers

Several kinds of mold can set off allergies.

"A mold spore is a little seed. Anywhere spores land, a mold colony can grow," Tringle said.

Nolen recommends fixing leaks where water could gather, keeping drains clear, keeping humidity low, and running an exhaust fan in the bathroom when using shower and in the kitchen when cooking to keep humidity out of the house.

If you or someone in your home have allergies, the severity of the reaction will determine what steps you have to take. But while the steps are pretty simple, one thing always matters more than technology.

"It basically comes down to a lot of elbow grease," Tringle said. **Other Links:**

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