

Reducing your exposure to allergens

Respiratory

Introduction

This leaflet will advise you of the different types of allergens and give you advice on how to reduce your exposure to these.

Reducing your exposure to allergens

The best way to prevent an allergic reaction is to avoid the substance that you are allergic to, although this is not always easy or practical to do so.

Allergy is one of the major factors associated with the cause and persistence of conditions such as allergic rhinitis (hay fever), eczema and asthma. Identifying the allergen or allergens causing the symptoms is an essential part of treating allergic diseases.

In some cases the offending allergen may be obvious. However, in other cases your doctor will need to consider your medical history together with the results of allergy tests (skin prick allergy tests or allergen specific blood tests). Once the allergens are correctly identified, the following practical advice on avoiding or minimising your exposure to known allergens may help.

How can I avoid pollen?

In the UK the height of the pollen season usually occurs in the spring and summertime and the major amount of pollen in the air usually occurs early morning, evening and at night time. Typically, people are affected during spring by tree pollen and in the summer by grass pollen.

Depending on the weather patterns, there may be an increase of pollen in the early hours of the morning. Although pollen is known to be blown long distances on windy days, most pollen is deposited within a short distance of its source. The highest pollen counts occur on calm, hot, sunny days, higher pollen counts are also associated with thunderstorms.

When pollen granules come into contact with water, starch granules are released that are small enough to be breathed into the airways, triggering allergic rhinitis and asthma in some people.

Avoidance of pollen is difficult, but the following advice may help:

- Remain indoors (when possible) during high pollen counts particularly during windy days or thunderstorms
- Check weather reports for the pollen count
- Wear wraparound sunglasses (reduces the amount of pollen that gets into your eyes)

The prevention of infection is a major priority in all healthcare and everyone has a part to play.

- Please decontaminate your hands frequently for 20 seconds using soap and water or alcohol gel if available
- If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting, cough or other respiratory symptoms, a temperature or any loss of taste or smell please do not visit the hospital or any other care facility and seek advice from 111
- Keep the environment clean and tidy
- Let's work together to keep infections out of our hospitals and care homes.

- Use the recirculated air setting in your car (if available) when pollen levels are high
- Keep doors and windows shut when possible
- Avoid activities such as mowing grass
- Avoid grassy areas, such as parks and fields, particularly in the early morning, evening or night, when the pollen count is highest
- Shower after outdoor activities where pollen exposure might be high
- When drying bedding or clothing, do this inside or using a tumble dryer to reduce pollen exposure onto fabrics.

How can I avoid dust (dust mites)?

The first room to tackle is the bedroom and in particular bedding, where we spend the greatest number of consecutive hours. House dust mites are one of the most common allergen sources. There is no easy way of removing house dust mites. Regardless of what advertisements may say, there is no vacuum cleaner, dust mite spray or dry cleaning that will completely eliminate dust mites.

Depending on the severity of symptoms, and in the case of childhood asthma, eczema, chronic or recurrent sinusitis, and middle ear infections with dust mite as a provoking trigger, the following advice may help:

- Damp down dust, or use electrostatic cloths
- Wash sheets, pillows and bedding weekly in hot water (>60°C)
- Cover mattress, pillows and quilt with dust mite resistant covers
- Avoid activities such as vacuuming too frequently
- Vacuum carpets weekly. Using a vacuum cleaner fitted with a HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Air) filter, as it can trap more dust mites than ordinary vacuum cleaners
- Replace carpets with hard flooring
- Remove soft toys from bed or bedrooms
- Use of Venetian blinds, flat or vertical blinds or shutters rather than curtains or drapes
- Consider leather couches, armchairs or settees rather than cloth or textile ones.

How can I avoid mould spores?

Mould in the home can show as mould, mildew or a musty smell. It is commonly found in bathrooms, refrigerators and in places with little air circulation such as bedrooms with en suite bathrooms. Tiny particles released by moulds can cause an allergic reaction in some people.

If you are allergic to mould, you may consider:

- Removing any visible mould by cleaning with bleach or mould remover
- Keeping your home dry and well ventilated
- Seal leaks in bathrooms and ceilings
- Dealing with any damp and condensation in your home
- Removing indoor pot plants (which promote mould growth)
- Avoiding working with garden compost, mulch or mowing lawns
- Avoiding damp buildings, damp woods, rotten leaves and cut grass.

How can I avoid pet hair or dander?

Exposure to pets (such as cats, dogs, guinea pigs, horses, rabbits, mice, rats), at home or work can trigger allergic reactions in some people. Cats and dogs are a major source of allergens in the home environment.

The allergens come from the sweat glands in all cats and salivary glands in all dogs. Although the amount of allergen released can vary between breeds, there are no hypoallergenic animals or breeds.

As allergens are stuck to the hair and skin of pets, the allergens become airborne when the pet sheds their hair. The allergens can remain airborne for some time. Cat allergen is especially difficult to remove from homes. It can remain in the house for months after the cat has been removed. Cat allergen can also be found in places where cats have never lived. For example, it can be carried around on clothing to schools and offices.

The most effective method of allergen avoidance for people who are allergic to pets, is removal of the pets from the home. For example, if there is no doubt that cat or other animal allergen is a major cause of symptoms, then the best advice is for the animal to be removed from the home. It can be an emotional decision, but removing the pet should be considered.

If pets cause only minor problems, keeping pets out of bedrooms and living areas may be a compromise. Even then, it may take months after pet removal before allergen levels are reduced. The effectiveness of some measures such as washing animals frequently and using HEPA air filters remains uncertain.

Dogs, guinea pigs, mice and rabbits are not as allergenic as cats, and are more easily kept outside. They can, however, cause annoying and occasionally serious problems.

Horse allergy can be very serious and even animal hair on clothes may be sufficient to trigger asthma. Great care must be taken to shower and change clothes before returning to a home of a person allergic to horses.

Birds may occasionally cause allergic symptoms. This is a different problem to pigeon fancier's lung which is a serious condition and requires complete avoidance.

If you are visiting a friend or relative with a pet, ask them not to dust or vacuum on the day you are visiting, as this will stir up the allergens into the air.

If you cannot permanently remove a pet from the house, you could try:

- Keeping pets outside as much as possible, or limiting them to a particular area of the house, preferably an area without carpet
- Not allowing pets in bedrooms
- Washing pets at least once a week
- Regularly grooming pets outside
- Regularly washing all bedding and soft furnishings pets lie on, and using an air filter in rooms where you spend most of your time
- Increase ventilation with fans or air conditioning, or by opening windows.

How can I avoid a food allergy?

By law, food manufacturers must clearly label any foods that contain something that is known to cause allergic reactions in some people. By carefully checking the label for the list of ingredients, you should be able to avoid an allergic reaction. People with food allergies most often experience an allergic reaction while eating out at a restaurant.

You can avoid this by:

- Not relying on the menu description alone (remember, many sauces or dressings could contain allergens)
- Communicating clearly with the waiting staff and asking for their advice
- Avoiding places where there is a chance that different types of food could come into contact with each other, such as buffets or bakeries
- Letting restaurant staff know your dietary requirements, including the severity of your food allergy or intolerance

- Always checking what allergens are in the dish, even if you have eaten it before, as recipes and ingredients can change
- Remember, simple dishes are less likely to contain “hidden” ingredients. If you are not sure about a dish, do not risk it.

How can I avoid insect bites and stings?

If you have ever suffered a bad reaction to an insect bite or sting, it is important to take precautions to minimise your risk.

When you are outdoors, particularly in the summer, you could:

- Cover exposed skin
- Wear shoes
- Apply insect repellent
- Avoid wearing strong perfumes or fragrances, as these can attract insects.

Where can I find more information?

If you require further information about allergen avoidance then please contact:

The Respiratory Centre (B1)
New Cross Hospital
Wolverhampton Road
Wolverhampton
WV10 0QP
01902 695061
Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm.

English

If you need information in another way like easy read or a different language please let us know.

If you need an interpreter or assistance please let us know.

Lithuanian

Jeigu norėtumėte, kad informacija jums būtų pateikta kitu būdu, pavyzdžiui, supaprastinta forma ar kita kalba, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Jeigu jums reikia vertėjo ar kitos pagalbos, prašome mums apie tai pranešti.

Polish

Jeżeli chcieliby Państwo otrzymać te informacje w innej postaci, na przykład w wersji łatwej do czytania lub w innym języku, prosimy powiedzieć nam o tym.

Prosimy poinformować nas również, jeżeli potrzebowaliby Państwo usługi tłumaczenia ustnego lub innej pomocy.

Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਰੂਪ ਵਿਚ, ਜਿਵੇਂ ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਾਨ ਰੂਪ ਜਾਂ ਕਿਸੇ ਦੂਜੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ, ਚਾਹੀਦੀ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

ਜੇ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਦੁਭਾਸ਼ੀਏ ਦੀ ਜਾਂ ਸਹਾਇਤਾ ਦੀ ਲੋੜ ਹੈ ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਦੱਸੋ।

Romanian

Dacă aveți nevoie de informații în alt format, ca de exemplu caractere ușor de citit sau altă limbă, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Dacă aveți nevoie de un interpret sau de asistență, vă rugăm să ne informați.

Traditional Chinese

如果您需要以其他方式了解信息，如易读或其他语种，请告诉我们。

如果您需要口译人员或帮助，请告诉我们。