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Health & Science

To prevent allergic reactions, you might try washing bed pillows and microwaving fruit

By Robin Wilson

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The fall allergy season is in full swing and will be with us until early frost chills the air. Ragweed allergy, or hay fever, brings symptoms that include sneezing; stuffy or runny nose; itchy eyes, nose and throat; and trouble sleeping. There is a lot of conventional wisdom about allergies and how to handle them, and not all of it is right.

Here are some common misconceptions, along with tips for preventing allergic reactions:

- **Fruit is not always your friend.** Many favorite fruits — apples, bananas, peaches, plums, etc. — can cause symptoms similar to grass or tree pollen reactions. If you are sensitive, cook the fruit in the microwave for 10 seconds to deactivate the proteins, and do not eat the skin.
- **Cleaner is not always better.** “Cleanliness is next to godliness” has a nice ring to it. However, a little exposure to dirt and germs is actually a good thing during childhood, because it strengthens the immune system. When cleaning, always use products labeled nontoxic, and remove excess books, magazines and other clutter from the sleeping area to reduce dust buildup.
- **Vintage pillow equals heavy allergy symptoms.** If your pillow is older than three years and has not been washed during that time, it weighs more now than when you bought it. It’s loaded with dust mites that are next to your face while you sleep. The microscopic mites cause allergies in many people.

Use hypoallergenic pillows over down pillows, and use a zippered pillow protector that you wash weekly for a double barrier. For a down-alternative pillow, use a commercial washer (or a front-loading home machine) and warm water, and dry it on a low setting with two tennis balls to refluff. Dry-clean down pillows.

- **There’s no such thing as a hypoallergenic dog.** Poodles, labradoodles and Yorkshire terriers are all considered hypoallergenic because they don’t shed hair, but there’s no scientific proof that these breeds produce lower amounts of Can f 1, the most common dog allergen. Minimize contact with pets, never allow them on the bed and always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and hot water after playing with an animal. Also, wash and groom the pet to remove excess hair. And vacuum regularly.
- **Always use a nylon shower-curtain liner.** Allergy sufferers are told to shower often to remove pollen and pet dander from their bodies. But the phthalate chemicals in vinyl shower curtains emit chemical odors with humidity and heat, and also attract mold and mildew. For those with allergic sensitivities, these smells

can cause airways to constrict and even provoke an asthma attack. Replace your vinyl liner with a nylon liner, which can be washed and is less prone to mold buildup.

- **Mold is not just a bathroom tile issue.** Mold is a huge trigger for allergies and asthma, and it's more prevalent than you might realize. Watch for mold in the dishwasher and refrigerator pan, on your air-conditioning system and on any wood, paper or cotton materials that sit in water for too long.
- **Freeze stuffed toys.** Your child's favorite stuffed animals can harbor dust mites that may trigger allergies and asthma. To prevent buildup of mites, freeze all stuffed toys for 24 hours in a zip-lock bag at least once a month. Some stuffed animals can be washed in a machine. (Of course, that can leave the toys misshapen, which can be very upsetting to the child.)
- **Watch the ingredients.** We're told to lather up with lotions and sunscreen, but be careful and watch the ingredients. To reduce the chance of contact dermatitis, insist that such products are parabens-free and hypoallergenic, or made for sensitive skin.
- **Tear out the carpet.** Tile and hardwood floors are a much better choice, but carpeting must be vacuumed or cleaned regularly. Shake out and vacuum area rugs regularly, and use a vacuum with a HEPA filter.
- **Keep the outside world from coming in.** Always take off your shoes when going indoors and keep all outdoor tools and toys in a garage or shed. If you don't, you will be dragging dirt and pollen into your living area and provoking allergies and asthma.

By following these simple strategies, it is possible for many people to eliminate the wheezes and sneezes and enjoy a better quality of life.

Wilson is an “ambassador” to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

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