

Allergy Proof Your Home

By Sandy Cook

It's amazing what people can be allergic to. Foods, animals, molds, dust, pollens, chemicals, insect stings or bites – the list is long. This article focuses on common airborne allergens and looks at methods for allergy-proofing your home.

First, let's go over some of the more common, allergy-related terminology.

- **Allergen:** A substance that your body regards as alien and as an irritant, thus triggering an allergic reaction. House dust, consisting of both indoor and outdoor elements, dust mites, dander, molds and pollens are common allergens. These sneeze-inducing annoyances can be carried on animals or found in upholstered furniture, carpets, drapes, towels – you name it. Remember, though late summer is generally the most allergy-intensive time, indoor allergens are a constant throughout the year.
- **Allergic Rhinitis:** Commonly known as hay fever.
- **Allergy:** An extreme reaction to an allergen, as a result of the release of histamine or histamine-like substances into affected cells. Note that some allergic-type responses, like asthma, are thought by some to be prompted by stress. Ask your doctor about this if you've any doubts.
- **Anaphylaxis:** Life-threatening response to an allergen. If this occurs, do not hesitate. Find a doctor! Symptoms: Wheezing or difficulty in breathing, lightheadedness or dizziness (indicating lowered blood pressure), rapid or irregular heartbeat, possible swelling or hives, and unconsciousness.
- **Animal Dander:** It is not normally fur or feathers that act as allergens, but rather animal (or even human) dander, also known as dandruff. It's best to be tested by an allergist for dander hypersensitivity.
- **HEPA (High-Efficiency Particulate Air):** This label is seen on specially built air filters that, with their microscopic pores, can filter out allergens. To reduce airborne allergens, equip your air conditioning or heating units with such filters. You can also purchase, at reasonable prices, HEPA-adapted vacuum cleaners.
- **Histamine:** A substance released by your immune system after an encounter with an allergen. This results in annoying symptoms like sneezing, runny noses, watery eyes, itching and swelling.
- **Immunotherapy:** At present, this is the only long-term treatment available to desensitize allergy sufferers. This involves a series of shots, over a space of years, with each successive shot containing an increased amount of the allergen in question. While possibly unpleasant, such treatment has a high success rate, and could allow you to keep that beloved pet.
- **RAST (Radioallergosorbent Test):** The blood test that allows physicians to pinpoint allergies. It

also rates the degree of your sensitivity.

Now, what can one do about their allergies?

As stated above, shots may be required. In any case, if at all possible, you'll want to remove whatever's causing the problem. This could mean getting rid of a wood-burning stove, some overstuffed and possibly dust-mite infested furniture, or even all carpeting, which houses hoards of potentially dangerous microscopic critters.

You'll also want to clean – clean every surface, and wash all fabrics. Upholstery, drapes, towels and bedding should be cleaned thoroughly and on a regular basis. Also, hard surfaces like window sills, floors, walls, cabinet fronts and interiors and countertops need to be washed down. Even with the utmost care, it may be a full six months before the full benefits are reaped.

If it's a matter of pets, you've got choices. There are always shots or doctor-prescribed oral medication for less severe cases. If the pet remains indoors, ideally someone else can care for it. This person would also wash the animal often. If you do this, you avoid excessive contact, and the cleaner the animal is, the less dander will be spread. Throw in a good vacuuming at least twice a week, and you're on your way to a healthier, less allergic, you. Of course, you might choose to keep the animal outdoors. Still, where an animal is concerned, always stop to ask yourself if the treatment you're considering is the best thing for it. It may simply be that you need to find a new and loving home for your furry or feathered friend.

Allergies can pop up in anyone in any stage of life. For more details, call your doctor or check on-line for web sites that specialize in allergy prevention.