

Unexpected Allergy Culprits

By Jenny Stamos Kovacs

The spring allergy season has sprung, but don't blame your watery eyes and runny nose entirely on pollen.

Other surprising allergens may lurk in unexpected places in your home--and make you feel even worse. In fact, the list of sneeze-inducing culprits is long: animal dander, mold, dust, and dust mites (tiny insects that thrive on organic matter, primarily flakes of skin), as well as pollen carried into the house from outside. But these irritants are manageable--and getting a handle on them will help reduce your symptoms. We went to four top experts for the unexpected sources of your sneezes and some room-by-room tips for eliminating them.

1. Pet-Owning Visitors

- Pals with pooches may be unwittingly dragging pet dander into your home.
- They usually have animal dander on their clothes, and can deposit this irritant on upholstered furniture--even if they don't bring Fido or Felix with them.

Solution: Vacuum your couches and padded chairs after pet-owning pals sit on them. Prevent the allergens from spewing right back out of the machine by using one with a HEPA filter (which traps tiny particles so they can't escape the dust bag).

2. Couch Pillows, Throws, and Stuffed Toys

- Sitting on the sofa may set off allergy symptoms.
- These items come into contact with skin, and that means tiny flakes that slough off and encourage dust mites. If your pet sits on, fetches, or plays with any of these, they're also covered with animal dander.

Solution: Tumble the items in the dryer on high for 10 to 15 minutes each week. (If this will damage the material, clean instead according to the manufacturer's instructions.)

3. Book Shelves

- It's not just your novel's plot twists that are causing your eyes to tear up.
- You can also blame the dust that collects on books and other shelf-dwellers, including framed photographs and mementos. Books can also contribute to indoor mold problems, especially in humid conditions.

Solution: Keep shelves of all kinds, including bookshelves, away from the bed, or banish them from the bedroom entirely. Place trinkets behind glass doors so they don't collect dust. Clean surfaces and vacuum bedroom floors at least once a week.

4. Bed Pillows

Dust mites flock to this icky allergen breeding ground.

The warmth and humidity of your body encourage dust mites to grow in bed pillows, no matter what type of stuffing they have.

Solution: Either trade old pillows for new ones annually, or encase pillows in allergy-proof covers that you wash once or twice a month in hot water (follow the manufacturer's instructions). The most allergy-resistant, comfortable cases are made of tightly woven fabric that's impermeable to dust mites--and feels good to the touch. Check out the options at allergybuyersclub.com and nationalallergy.com.

5. Bathroom Floor Mat

Stepping out of the shower may be bringing on your sneezing and wheezing.

Trapped moisture in the bath mat causes dust mites and mold to thrive.

Solution: Choose a washable mat and clean it weekly. After a shower or steamy bath, hang it up and open a window or run the fan.

6. Refrigerator Door Seal

This rarely cleaned germ zone is an easy place for mold to thrive.

As you transfer food in and out of the refrigerator, moisture, crumbs, and spills can build up in the crevices of the door seal and encourage mold to flourish there.

Solution: Wipe the seal with a mixture of mold-zapping bleach and water weekly; use a cotton swab to get into the grooves and clean them thoroughly.

7. Cooking Steam

It turns out boiling a pot of penne can be a significant allergy trigger.

Steam wafts from pots and pans as you cook and settles in places you may not clean daily, causing mold to build up. Spots where dampness may land include walls, ceilings, cupboard doors, upper shelves, and areas hidden behind large appliances.

Solution: Run the stove's exhaust fan to vent cooking moisture--not just smells--out of the house. If mold does appear, eliminate it with a solution of bleach and water.

8. Damp Clothes

Letting wet clothes sit in the hamper or in the washing machine could cause germs to invade your laundry pile.

Mold and bacteria can develop on damp, unwashed clothing that sits around for days before it's laundered, as well as on clean items left in the washer tub for more than a few hours.

Solution: Don't let moist, dirty laundry build up, and dry freshly washed items ASAP. Here's a bonus idea: Use liquid detergent instead of powder, which can produce irritating dust, worsening your allergy symptoms.

9. Your Hair and Clothes

You're an unsuspecting Trojan horse for sneaking annoying allergens into your home.

When you arrive home after spending time outdoors, you carry in dust and pollen on your shoes and clothes and in your hair (long hair and loose hairstyles tend to trap more irritants than short or tightly bound strands).

Solution: When outside, cover your hair with a hat or scarf. When you get home, remove your head covering and shoes inside the door, change into clothes that you wear only indoors, and shampoo and dry your hair. Wash your comb and brush weekly to keep them free of any irritants they've picked up.

10. Plants

Here's one time when it's not so easy being green.

Damp soil can support the development of mold, and if you spill occasionally as you water, you can encourage growths in any carpet or curtains you happen to hit.

Solution: Give away or toss out plants if mold and dust cause you to have severe symptoms. If you choose to keep the plants instead, place the pots on tile and well away from curtains. Bonus tip: A layer of pebbles or small stones placed on top of the soil will prevent the release of mold spores that may be growing in the soil.

11. Fish Tank

Without proper care, you may find Nemo contributing to your symptoms.

Mold grows on parts of the tank or bowl that are out of the water but nevertheless remain damp. Carelessly strewn fish food also helps mold develop and can nourish a dust mite colony.

Solution: Use a rag to dry off above-water tank parts daily. When you feed the fish, make sure the food lands in the water, not on the tabletop or floor.

The following authorities supplied the information in this article:

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- Morris Nejat, MD, New York Allergy and Sinus Center
- James Seltzer, MD, chairman of the Indoor Environment Committee of the American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology
- James Sublett, MD, managing partner, Family Allergy and Asthma, Louisville