

house dust mite



Most people with allergies find that a number of provoking factors (triggers) make their symptoms worse. A common trigger for allergy is the house dust mite.

Dust mite allergy can aggravate:

- Asthma
- Eczema
- Hay fever
- Sinusitis
- Middle ear infections.

If you are unsure if dust mite triggers your allergy, see a doctor for further assessment. The doctor may consider your medical history and results of allergy tests (blood test or skin prick tests). You may be referred to an allergy specialist.

What are house dust mites?

House dust mites are microscopic creatures roughly one third of a millimetre long. They thrive in their thousands in warm, moist places feeding on dead skin scales.

They live in soft furnishings such as beds, bedding, carpets, upholstered furniture, and soft toys. It is the mites' droppings which readily become airborne, and when inhaled, can provoke a strong allergic response. These droppings are distributed in dust throughout the house.

Dust mites can produce up to 200 times their own weight in droppings in their lifetime. They are extremely sensitive to dry conditions and changes in temperature.

The house dust mite population is high around coastal areas of Australia and scarcer in drier inland places.

They are not usually in the air and only become airborne during and after dust-raising activities such as vacuuming and dusting.

Reducing levels of dust mites

If you are allergic to dust mites you may be advised to reduce your exposure to them.

Regardless of what advertisements may say there is no vacuum cleaner, dust mite spray

or dry cleaning that will completely eliminate the dust mite.

To reducing exposure to dust mites it is necessary to:

- Kill house dust mites
- Remove the allergen they produce
- Reduce areas where they live and breed.

The first place to start is the bedroom, in particular the bedding as this is where you are most likely to be exposed to dust mites and spend many hours in contact with them.

In the bedroom

1. Cover mattresses, pillows and quilts in dust mite-proof covers. These protective covers must be washed approximately every 2 months as per the manufacturer's recommendation.
2. Wash sheets and pillow cases weekly in water hotter than 55°C. This will kill dust mites and wash away the allergen they produce - that is, their droppings. Cold water does not kill dust mites. If you cannot wash in hot water, use a commercial product containing eucalyptus or tea tree oil formulated to kill dust mites in cold water. Hot tumble drying of washed items will also kill dust mites. Dry cleaning is not as effective as it will kill dust mites but won't remove the allergen they produce. Blankets and quilts not encased in protective covers should be washed every 3 months as described above.
3. Remove sheepskin or woollen underlays.
4. Fluffy toys should not be kept on the bed or in the bedroom. It is preferable to buy toys that are not fluffy such as wooden or plastic toys that can be washed. Hot wash soft toys that can tolerate it. Otherwise put fluffy toys in the deep freeze once a week, for 24 hours to kill dust mites but note, this will not remove the allergen they produce.

Other measures

5. Timber and vinyl coverings are preferred along with other hard coverings as they are easily cleaned. Carpets contain large

amounts of house dust mite and animal allergens that cannot be completely removed by vacuuming. Recent research suggests that carpets may provide some benefit in preventing allergens from becoming airborne, but the health benefit is yet to be proven.

6. Damp dust or use electrostatic cloths to clean hard surfaces including floors, weekly.
7. Vacuum carpets weekly. Vacuuming increases the amount of house dust mite allergen in the air for up to 20 minutes so if possible, ask someone else to do the vacuuming and wait 20 minutes before re-entering the room. Vacuums with a HEPA filter prevent allergens from being blown back into the room.
8. Reduce humidity. Have a dry and well ventilated house with adequate insulation. Evaporative air conditioners release water into the air potentially increasing both dust mites and mould growth.
9. Choose window coverings that can be easily cleaned, such as Venetian blinds or flat blinds, washable curtains or external shutters.

Products that are not recommended

1. Air filters are unlikely to make a difference as house dust mite allergen is not often airborne.
2. Chemical control methods such as acaracides sprays are unlikely to make a difference as the chemicals kill the mite but do not remove the allergen. There is limited information on their effectiveness and safety.
3. Dehumidifiers.

Other activities that may be of benefit include:

1. Keep bedrooms well lit with natural light if possible.
2. Air blankets weekly, where possible in natural sunlight.
3. Showering before going to bed is thought to be of benefit.
4. If possible, dry the bedding in sunlight, as the mite is sensitive to ultra violet light.
5. Vacuum the mattress and any upholstered furniture weekly. More frequent vacuuming has been shown to be of little benefit.

6. Minimise the number of items stored under beds and on top of wardrobes.
7. Wet and steam cleaning removes the mite from carpets more readily than vacuuming. However, research suggests the residual water left in the carpet may promote fungal growth.
8. Where possible, buy wooden, vinyl or leather furniture. Upholstered furniture can harbour the mite.

For more information contact the Breathe Better Health Line 1800 645 130, go to www.asthmasa.org.au or visit the Breathe Better Centre at 300 South Road Hilton.