

# Allergy Treatment: Avoidance Measures

## What are avoidance measures for treating allergies?

Avoidance measures, also known as environmental control, decrease the amount of contact you have with those substances to which you are allergic (i.e. allergens). The goal is not to eliminate your exposure to all your allergens, but simply decrease your exposure to some of them. Although avoidance measures often get overlooked, they are clearly the safest and most cost-effective allergy treatment available.

## How do I know what substances I need to avoid?

While our allergy testing can determine to which substances you are allergic, your personal recall of the timing of your nasal symptoms is also important. If your symptoms are consistently worse in a certain environment, there is probably something in that environment to which you are allergic. Worsening of symptoms during the spring season suggests a tree pollen allergy, while worsening during the summer suggests a grass pollen allergy and worsening during fall suggests a weed pollen allergy. Symptoms from dust mite allergies are usually year-round but become more severe with vacuuming, being in bed, and spending more time indoors. Symptoms from mold allergies are provoked by damp environments such as basements and wet weather. Raking leaves, cutting grass and gardening actually increase mold exposure more than pollen exposure. Obviously, allergy symptoms relating to an animal are made worse by being around the animal.

## If I am allergic to pollens, what avoidance measures should I take?

The most realistic option is to keep your house and car windows shut at all times. Your air-conditioning systems will help filter out the pollens. Not going outside in the morning and on clear, windy days may help but is probably not realistic.

## If I am allergic to dust mites, what avoidance measures should I take?

Dust mites are microscopic insects, not tabletop dust. They primarily live in fabric. As such, your efforts to control dust mites should be directed toward your bed and carpets.

If you have dust mite allergies, the single most important avoidance measure is to enclose your mattress and pillow with mite-proof encasings. Numerous studies have demonstrated

the effectiveness of these encasings at separating a person from the millions of dust mites living in mattresses and pillows. Fortunately, the material used in most of these encasings is non-plastic and breathable. In addition, these encasings are affordable and only need to be applied once. While you continue to change your sheets and pillowcases as usual, the mattress and pillow encasings can simply be left in place. For all these reasons, we strongly recommend all patients with dust mite allergies encase their pillow and mattress immediately.

In regards to bedding, we recommend washing sheets and pillowcases every week or two. Use hot water, as 130 degree temperatures kill dust mites. For blankets and comforters, consider using mite-proof encasings, periodic washing, or hot tumble drying.

## What other avoidance measures should I take for dust mites?

As explained above, dust mites are creatures living in fabric such as your carpet. As such, removing your carpet is definitely beneficial. Unfortunately, that option is expensive and frequently unrealistic. The alternative option of using carpet chemical treatments (ex. benzyl benzoate, tannic acid) only has limited short-term benefits.

The most practical measure regarding carpet treatment is to do weekly vacuuming with the proper equipment. With a regular vacuum cleaner and bag, the dust mites get sucked out of the carpet and pass through the bag back into the air. This problem may be helped by using special vacuum cleaning bags that do not allow microscopic particles to pass through them. Another alternative is to use a vacuum cleaner that contains a HEPA filter. Miele makes vacuums that have been certified not to allow air leakage before or after the bag. Ideally, the person with the dust mite allergies will not do the vacuuming and will remain outside that room for 30 minutes afterwards. If that is not an option, the affected person should consider taking an antihistamine and/or using Nasalcrom nasal spray beforehand.

To kill dust mites in loose rugs, place the rugs outdoors in the sunlight for three hours or in freezing temperatures overnight. When cleaning non-carpeted floors and dusting furniture, use a damp mop or cloth.

## What about the humidity in my house?

Dust mites do not survive well in less than 50% room humidity. Therefore, a gauge to measure the humidity in your bedroom is a worthwhile investment. Humidity can be reduced by using high-efficiency dehumidifiers as well as central air-conditioning and heating systems.

## If I am allergic to molds, what avoidance measures should I take?

One step is to use dilute Clorox or equivalent antifungal cleaner to remove any visible mold in the bathroom and other areas. In addition, eliminate standing water anywhere in the house or basement, as moisture promotes mold development. As with dust mite control, keeping the air humidity less than 50% is beneficial. A dehumidifier in the basement that drains directly outside or into the plumbing system is often needed. If your furnace/AC unit is in the basement, make sure the unit is properly sealed to keep out the moldy basement air.

In addition to these indoor measures, remember that raking leaves, gardening and even cutting the grass provoke mold allergies more than pollen allergies. If you cannot avoid these activities, consider taking an antihistamine or using Nasalcrom nasal spray before working outdoors.

## If I am allergic to my cat or dog, what should I do?

One solution is to keep the pet out of your bedroom at all times and use a free-standing HEPA air filtration device in the bedroom. We do not recommend giving your cat a bath. Any benefit in washing your cat is gone in a very short period of time.

## Are special air filtration devices beneficial?

Free standing HEPA air filtration units are most appropriate in bedrooms of pet owners. Animal dander tends to float in the air and will become trapped inside these filters. These units are less beneficial in controlling dust mites because dust mites do not float in the air for a long time.

## How about special air filters on my HVAC duct return?

Regular fiberglass air filters do not effectively trap microscopic particles. Contrary to their advertising, washable electrostatic allergy filters also are not effective. On the other hand, 3M Filtrete filters are permanently electrostatic and do trap microscopic particles. These 3M Filtrete filters are available in most hardware stores in a limited number of sizes or at [www.filters-now.com](http://www.filters-now.com) in several sizes. Even though they appear to visibly become dirty quickly, the Filtrete filters actually only need to be changed every two to three months. While they are more expensive than regular filters and have never been studied in a clinical setting, they are a worthwhile consideration if you find them affordable and available in your needed size.

## Should I have my HVAC ventilation ducts cleaned?

While companies can impress you with the amount of dirt they remove from your air-conditioning ducts, cleaning your duct work does not reduce the amount of dust mites or other allergens in your house.

## Will this prevent me from experiencing any symptoms?

The more avoidance measures you do, the fewer symptoms you should experience. On the other hand, we must be realistic about what the average individual is willing to invest in terms of time and money. As such, we recommend:

*for pollen allergies:*

- keep house and car windows shut
- use your A/C to filter the pollens

*for dust mite allergies:*

- definitely use pillow and mattress mite-proof encasings
- wash bedding weekly in hot water that is at least 130 degrees
- vacuum regularly with the proper equipment
- try to keep your bedroom humidity less than 50%

*for mold allergies:*

- use antifungal cleaners as necessary
- try to keep your humidity less than 50%
- consider using a dehumidifier in the basement
- ensure that any furnace/AC unit in the basement is properly sealed
- avoid leaf raking, cutting grass, and gardening

*for pet allergies:*

- restrict pet from going in your bedroom
- use free-standing HEPA air cleaning unit