Asthma Allergens
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Asthma

What Is Asthma?
Asthma is a chronic disease. When someone has asthma, it can be hard to breathe and can be very serious in some cases. Asthma is not contagious, but it does run in families. If someone in your family has asthma, you or your children may have it too. Asthma has become one of the most common chronic diseases for children.

When an asthma reaction happens, it’s called an “asthma attack.” Asthma attacks make it hard to breathe because the breathing tubes in your lungs swell up and the muscles around the tubes tighten. Asthma symptoms frequently happen at night.

What Causes an Asthma Attack?
- Asthma attacks are caused by triggers. Some triggers — like cold weather, exercise, and forceful laughing or crying — can cause an asthma attack. Allergic reactions can also trigger an asthma attack.
- Second-hand cigarette smoke can trigger asthma attacks.

What Are the Warning Signs of an Asthma Attack?
- Signs include tightness in chest, shortness of breath, wheezing, and coughing that won’t stop. Other symptoms are very rapid breathing, difficulty talking, blue lips or fingernails, and a pale or sweaty face.
- If you or your child has recently been diagnosed with asthma, get to know what an asthma attack feels or looks like. That way, medicine can be taken quickly.

What Kind of Medicine Is Available to Treat Asthma?
- Medications can be taken as a pill or capsule, or from an inhaler.
- It may take time, but you and your doctor will have to decide what the best medicine is for you or your family member.
- One kind of medicine is taken every day, even if you feel OK.
  - Anti-inflammatory medicine prevents asthma attacks by reducing swelling and mucus in the lungs.
- The other medicine is called “rescue medicine.” It is taken during an attack to help you breathe better.
  - One type of rescue medicine, called a bronchodilator, relaxes the muscles that tighten the airway.

With a plan that includes medical treatment and control of triggers, people with asthma can lead healthy, active lives.
Allergens

What Is an Allergen?
An allergen is something that causes a physical reaction in you, called an allergy. An allergy is a developed sensitivity to a certain substance or environmental factor.

What Is an Allergic Reaction?
- Allergic reactions can include runny or stuffy nose, coughing, puffy eyes, itching, hives, or a rash.
- A more serious reaction could be an asthma attack or swelling of the breathing tubes and neck, causing the person to pass out or even die from lack of air.
- If you or a family member has allergies, know what it looks and feels like to have an allergic reaction so you can treat it quickly and correctly.

What Are Common Allergens?
- Many things — including foods, medicine, and insect bites — can cause allergic reactions.
- Allergens can be ingested or eaten, inhaled while breathing, or contacted on the skin.
- Allergens in the home can be caused by pollen, pet dander, mold, roaches, rodents, dust mites, chemicals, and perfumes.
  - Pet dander is dead skin flakes from dogs and cats. Animal hair or fur is not an allergen.

How Can I Find Out What I Am Allergic To?
- Your doctor will ask you a series of questions and perform tests to determine what you are allergic to and recommend any medication you might need to take. Not all allergies require medication.
- Good detective work on your part can narrow down the possibilities of what is causing a reaction. This will also help your doctor determine what you are allergic to.

How Can I Lessen Allergens in My Home?
- Keep clutter to a minimum. Clutter collects dust and provides a place for rodents and other pests, such as insects, to hide.
- Dust can trigger asthma, so have someone without asthma do the dusting. An N95 respirator can help limit dust and allergens that you could breathe in while dusting.
  - Purchase or borrow a bedroom air filter during times of high pollen to help control dust and pollen. It is very important to reduce dust in sleeping rooms.
  - Carpeting and rugs hold dust. If you have carpeting, vacuum regularly to get rid of dust. Vacuuming will also clean up pet dander from cats and dogs.

Where Can I Learn More About Asthma and Allergens?
- Clean appliances, furnaces, and air conditioning units to help eliminate dust. Change filters regularly to make them more efficient.
- Use zippered mattress and pillow covers to control dust mites. If the zippered mattress pad is uncomfortable, put a cloth mattress pad over it. Wash all bedding, blankets, and pillow covers weekly in hot water to kill any dust mites.
- Store food in tightly sealed containers to keep away pests such as cockroaches and rodents. Clean up crumbs and spills right away, empty your garbage often, and don’t leave pet food out overnight. Fix plumbing leaks and seal cracks where roaches or other bugs can get into your home.
- Allergies or asthma attacks due to pets can best be handled by not having a pet. If you already have pets, keep them away from sleeping areas.
- Prevent mold — another common allergen — by keeping a dry home. Houseplants can increase mold in the home, so leave them outside. For more information on mold prevention and treatment, see Virginia Cooperative Extension publication FCS-3, “How Housing Matters: Mold,” at www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/FCS/FCS-3/FCS-3_pdf.pdf.

A clean home is the best way to control pests, mold, and dander in your home.