

Allergic to home

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Building characteristics — public housing or private duplex, tall or short, new or old — are associated with indoor allergens, according to a new study by Northeastern researchers. The report, published in the Journal of Urban Health, found a clinically significant level of cat allergen was associated with living in high-rise buildings, and a high level of mouse allergen was associated with living in public housing. We asked lead author Lindsay Rosenfeld, associate research scientist for the Institute on Urban Health Research, to assess the findings.

According to the study, mouse allergen — also known as excrement — has six times the odds of being present in public housing compared to other types of housing. Why is public housing associated with mouse excrement, which is widely associated with high levels of asthma morbidity?

The high level of mouse [allergen](#) in [public housing](#) goes well beyond whether or not residents keep their apartments clean or follow medical guidelines for an asthmatic family member. Instead, for indoor allergens, there seems to be something about the buildings themselves — either their condition or their type (high-rise or low-rise, house or duplex) — that correlates with mouse and other allergens.

You also found that cat allergens are particularly prominent in high-rises compared to single-family

houses and duplexes. Aside from fixing structural problems, what can be done to ensure these buildings are safe for their residents?

Landlords are likely to respond to incentives to keep their buildings up to code. They should be rewarded and encouraged if their buildings don't violate design standards or contain high levels of indoor allergens. On the other hand, if landlords are penalized for violating building codes, they are likely to pass on such a penalty to their tenants. Tenants will have to make up the difference by paying higher rent and possibly sacrificing some other essential basic need, such as food or heating, to make up the difference.

Your research interests include "non-health" policies and programs that affect health, particularly urban planning and design, housing and neighborhoods. How does this study fit into your overall research agenda?

My research aims to tackle the social determinants of health. I conducted this study to make the urban planning and public health community, in particular, more aware of the ways in which buildings can affect health. It's becoming more and more commonplace for health problems in the community to be examined from a neighborhood-wide perspective. For example, on April 20, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston will host a conference where health and community development professionals will share expertise and new ideas for partnership.

Provided by Northeastern University

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