

Holiday season triggers allergies

December 18 2013, by Stasia Thompson

Getting out the boxes of holiday decorations from years gone by is a time-honored tradition. But in addition to stirring up memories, it also stirs up allergies.

"The dust from the boxes and on the decorations that have been packed away in dank basements or dusty attics is triggering reactions in allergy and asthma patients," said Joseph Leija, MD, allergist. During the allergy season (March-October), Dr. Leija is responsible for providing the official [allergy](#) count for the Midwest, which is available at Gottlieb Memorial Hospital's website, via phone through Chicago media outlets.

Carol Leopold suffers from severe allergies and so do her 12-year-old twins. "My husband and daughter are fine, but fresh Christmas trees and fur from Santa's suit make my sons and I choke up and stop breathing," she said. "I still go all out for the holidays but with three [artificial trees](#), silk poinsettias and lots of carefully scrutinized nut-free foods," she said.

The holidays are supposed to be some of the happiest times of the year. But as Mrs. Leopold notes, popular seasonal items such as fresh trees, scented air fresheners, live plants and more make the holidays miserable for many.

Here are Dr. Leija's top five tips for easy breathing this holiday season:

Use an Artificial Tree. The clean fragrance from the balsam, fir and pine trees available on every corner tree lot is pleasing, but it aggravates respiratory conditions. Not only is the scent a problem, but the dust,

mites and other pollutants on the live tree wreak havoc on your airways and nasal passages.

"The water in the tree holder also grows stagnant and collects mold, which is detrimental to those with allergies," Dr. Leija said.

Never Use Scented Candles or Home Fragrance Oils. The popularity of home fragrance products and scented specialty candles reaches its pinnacle during the holidays - and so do allergies. Unplug the electric scent distributors and take a pass on the potpourri simmering pots. "Far from creating an inviting home, the fragrance aggravates the sinuses and respiratory system so sufferers can't breathe," Dr. Leija said.

Avoid Real Poinsettias and Fresh Floral Arrangements. "The moist soil encourages the growth of mold. And if there is mold in your house, you are breathing mold spores," Dr. Leija said. This causes the passageways to swell and restrict airflow and can even cause skin rashes.

Keep the Humidity In Check. Warm and cool air humidifiers are up and running in many homes now that the cold, dry air is here. "Get a gauge and keep the humidity no higher than 48 to 50 percent," Dr. Leija said. "Too much humidity encourages the growth of mold, which triggers allergic reactions."

Store Holiday Decorations in Large Plastic Tubs. Save yourself some sneezes next year by purchasing large resealing plastic tubs for storage of decorations. Keep them dusted during the year to avoid buildup.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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