

Live trees, scented candles hijack the holidays for allergy sufferers

December 22 2014, by Stasia Thompson

The many smells and tastes of the holidays that get so many in a festive mood can make others sick, thanks to allergic reactions. But with some seasonal savvy, allergy sufferers can breathe easy this time of year.

"The dust from the boxes and on the decorations that have been packed away in dank basements or dusty attics is triggering reactions in my allergy and asthma patients," said Rachna Shah, MD, affiliate faculty member at Loyola Chicago Stritch School of Medicine and an allergist at Gottlieb Memorial Hospital.

The holidays are supposed to be a happy time of the year. But popular seasonal items, such as fresh trees, scented air fresheners and live plants, make the holidays miserable for many.

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

Clean the tree – Artificial or real, a tree can cause allergy problems. "A tree that is moldy exponentially increases home spore counts after just a few days, triggering reactions and illness," Dr. Shah said. "Some have found relief by spraying down the tree with water to remove mold and then limiting the amount of time the tree is indoors to 12 days or less."

The clean fragrance from the live balsam, fir and pine trees is pleasing, but it can aggravate respiratory conditions.

"No variety of live tree is less allergenic than any other," Dr. Shah said.

"Artificial is best if you have allergies."

The scent of a freshly cut tree as well as elements of its care can 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. Shah said.

Decorations used to adorn the tree may also be dusty, scented or carry irritants. If you choose an artificial tree, make sure the branches, as well as decorations, are dry and moisture-free. "Artificial [trees](#) and [holiday decorations](#) can grow mold if they get wet, as they often do in humid basements or attics," she warned.

Prepare for parties – Bring your own treats, especially for kids, at social gatherings where allergenic foods may be plentiful and the only option. "Those with egg, nut or dairy allergies especially can play it safe and enjoy the parties if they know what they are eating and drinking," Dr. Shah said. "Communicating in advance with the host can help avoid illness."

Pamper the pet – Dogs and cats spend more time indoors during the winter months and often bring allergens in with them from their trips outdoors, contaminating the environment for those with sensitive respiratory systems.

"Have your dog and cat groomed more often to remove dander and hair," Shah said. HEPA filters also help filter pet hair of all kinds as well.

Relax – "Anxiety has been shown to increase asthma symptoms," Dr. Shah said. "Use relaxation methods such as deep breathing, meditation or yoga to maintain control during the holiday hustle and bustle."

Never use scented candles or fragrance oils – The popularity of home fragrance products and scented specialty candles reaches a peak 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. Shah said.

Avoid real poinsettias and fresh flowers – "The moist soil encourages the growth of mold. And if there is mold in your house, you are breathing mold spores," Dr. Shah said. This causes air passageways to swell, which restricts airflow. It 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. Shah said. "Too much humidity encourages the growth of mold, which triggers [allergic reactions](#)."

Store decorations in plastic tubs – Save yourself some sneezes next year by purchasing large resealable plastic tubs to store [decorations](#). Dust them occasionally during the year.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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