

Don't let dust deck your halls this holiday season, says allergist

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Once the Thanksgiving leftovers are all packed up, many people head for their dusty attic to unpack their holiday decorations. However, according to an allergy expert at Baylor College of Medicine, those who suffer from dust allergies should take extra precautions as they prepare to deck the halls this year.

"Dust is a noxious material that needs to be avoided," said Dr. David Corry, professor and chief of the section of immunology, allergy and rheumatology at Baylor.

What is dust?

Corry said that [dust](#) is a complex material made mostly of fibers, and the nature of these fibers determine the degree and seriousness of the irritant factor. Fibers can come from cotton and wool that come off of our clothes or those that are shed from construction materials that the house is built out of, such as wood, paper and, in older structures, asbestos.

Dust also can consist of pollens, fragments of insects that degrade and turn into small particles (cockroaches, [dust mites](#) and other common household pests) and fragmented fecal matter that comes from these insects or from droppings of animals such as rats, mice and birds that can sometimes be found in attics.

Other materials that can make up dust and can trigger the immune

system include fungi and biochemical materials that come from those fungi.

Dust can cause a mild irritant effect, meaning it doesn't turn on a specific part of the immune system, but the body does simple things to get rid of it like sneezing or increasing the flow of secretions in your airways or eyes to flush it out.

Fungi in dust can grow within your airway, which contributes to disorders such as chronic sinusitis, asthma and other conditions.

"If we are exposed to enough of these elements, including fecal matter, pollens, fungi and the components of insects, then we can start having a variety of breakthrough allergic conditions, including eczema of the skin, itchy or watery eyes, runny nose, sneezing and coughing," said Corry. "A more serious reaction to these same elements is asthma, which is a constriction of the airways that causes shortness of breath and can even be a life-threatening situation."

What can you do?

Dust will get disturbed and aerosolized no matter how careful you are in getting the items down from the attic, so Corry said to take precautions to avoid contact with that dust.

Wearing a mask and goggles can keep dust from getting into the eyes and the respiratory tract. Wearing nitrile gloves, which are available at most drugstores, also can help. Corry said to avoid latex gloves as latex itself can cause an allergic reaction. Wearing long sleeves and a hat may also help. Throw the mask and gloves out after using and wash clothes, take a shower and wash your hair afterward.

If the items in the attic are large, solid materials, try vacuuming them

before moving them around. Setting up a HEPA (high efficiency particulate accelerator) filter also can help remove small matter from the air.

However, Corry said that there's no perfect way to completely avoid contact with dust, so those who have known dust allergies should pre-medicate by taking a non-sedating antihistamine. If eyes are particularly irritated by dust, pre-treat with antihistamine eye drops. For those with more serious allergic reactions to dust, seeing an allergist for skin prick testing to identify the agents that are contributing to the symptoms is warranted. Depending on the results of such testing, initiation of allergen-desensitizing immunotherapy ("allergy shots") may be appropriate and may alleviate bothersome allergies.

Prevention

When repacking these items at the end of the holiday season, Corry suggests putting all items in one box and then putting that entire box in another box and sealing it carefully with tape. When unpacking next year, take the tape off, remove the inner box and take that one downstairs. The outmost chamber should never leave the attic.

Corry said that it's inevitable that attics are going to build up with dust, so taking the proper precautions and tailoring a plan according to each individuals' level of problem is key. He also said to keep children and pets away from dust as much as possible.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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