

Are your allergies ready to head off to college?

July 5 2023, by Todd A. Mahr, MD, Executive Medical Director,
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As you stare down your freshman year of college and contemplate living away from home, you're probably facing a few "firsts": First roommate who isn't a sibling; first time fending for yourself to make sure you're eating properly; and if you have nasal allergies, food allergies or asthma, this could be the first time you're in charge of keeping your symptoms under control.

Your health, particularly regarding [allergic diseases](#), shouldn't be among the last things you prepare for as you make plans to leave home for college. There are many details to handle before you depart, so start planning now for your [allergy](#) and asthma care.

Some of the things you'll need to consider as you plan for your first year away include:

What will health care visits look like?—If you have an allergist you've been seeing for years, you'll have to consider whom you'll consult while away. Ask your allergist for a recommendation or contact the health care service at your school to find out if they have an allergist you can work with. The [American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology](#) has an [allergist locator](#) that can help you in your search to find an allergist in your new town.

What other health factors will change? — Will your prescriptions need to be transferred to a new pharmacy? Are your prescriptions up to date? Will you be in a different climate that could possibly affect your symptoms? Do some research to find out which local grasses and pollens you might encounter. If you suffer from severe allergies that can cause anaphylaxis, find out where the nearest hospital is and make sure you'll be able to get there in case of emergency. Make sure you have your own insurance card, and know how you'll be paying for visits surrounding your allergies or asthma.

While dorm food has improved, food choices must be safe—If you have food allergies, no matter how good (or bad) the food at school may be, you can't consume it if it contains anything to which you are allergic. Many schools have special accommodations for students with food allergies, so notify school officials ahead of your arrival. Talk to food handlers about [safety standards](#) and ask about ingredients at every meal. Look into having a small refrigerator in your room where you can store foods that are safe for you to eat. Be aware that some dorm-style refrigerators are not designed to chill food to safe temperatures, so research products and monitor the actual temperature inside the fridge.

Anything that impairs judgment is a danger—If your [judgment](#) is impaired due to drugs, alcohol or lack of sleep, you'll be less aware of your risk for accidental exposure to foods that may cause anaphylaxis. Tell your friends and others in your circle, such as your resident adviser, about your allergies and asthma so they can help you avoid allergic triggers. They should know what to do if you show signs of anaphylaxis. You should also recognize there are risks associated with intimacy, and the potential for partners to transfer [food](#) allergens through saliva. Discussions surrounding drugs, alcohol and [sexual activity](#) can be difficult, but your allergist might be a place to start if you're looking for resources on these topics.

Cleaning skills can come in very handy—Although dorm rooms are notoriously messy and a bit gross in general, knowing how to clean means you have the power to get rid of allergens like dust and mold. Use sheet and pillowcase covers, along with HEPA air filters, to protect your nose and eyes from allergens. If your residence hall happens to be near a major road, you may find pollutants affecting your asthma.

Air conditioning is your friend—If your dorm has air conditioning, the filtration it provides will help keep out pollen. Open windows can cause allergic issues for those suffering from seasonal allergies. Some

colleges will make accommodations by allowing or providing [air conditioning](#) for students with allergies, even if all dorm rooms are not equipped. However, [air conditioners](#) must be kept clean to help.

Heading to college is a great adventure for most young people—It's a chance to meet interesting new people and advance your [academic skills](#). To get the most of your freshman year, make sure you've created a solid plan for dealing with potential allergens and symptoms before you leave home in the fall.

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