House dust mite
Summary

- The house dust mite gets its name from its habitat – household dust.
- The house dust mite has been associated with a range of respiratory and dermatological allergies.
- If you are allergic to house dust mites, it may help to reduce their population, and remove their dead bodies and faeces from your home as much as possible.
- You may also need to consider dealing with other allergens in your home to which you may be sensitive. For example, pet owners may need to keep their pets out of doors.

The most common type of dust mite found in Australian homes is Dermatophagoides pteronyssinus, which tends to prefer coastal rather than inland areas. This mite has been associated with dermatological and respiratory allergies in humans, such as eczema and asthma. However, there is no single, definitive sign that house dust mites trigger a person’s allergy symptoms. Asthma, for example, can be triggered by a range of other indoor allergens such as fungi (moulds) or animal dander (fluff from hair, fur or feathers).

Symptoms of allergic reaction to dust mites

House dust mites can trigger respiratory or dermatological conditions including asthma and eczema. Symptoms can include:

- wheezing
- coughing
- breathlessness
- a tight feeling in the chest
- runny nose
- itchy nose
- itchy eyes
- itchy skin
- skin rashes.

Physical characteristics of the house dust mite

The characteristics of a house dust mite include:

- less than half a millimetre in length, which makes it hard to see with the naked eye
- wingless
- oval-shaped body
- light coloured body with fine stripes
- life span of around two months or so, depending on the conditions.

Allergic reaction to dust mites

Unlike other common household bugs (fleas, for example), dust mites don’t bite. Their bodies, secretions and faeces contain particular proteins that can trigger allergic symptoms in susceptible people.

Common hiding spots for dust mites

The diet of the house dust mite includes shed skin flakes, pollen and fungal spores. It prefers warm, humid and dark environments. Common hiding spots around the home include:

- mattresses and bed linen
- upholstered furniture
- shag-pile or long-fibred carpets
- soft toys.

Diagnosis and treatment for dust mite allergies

Allergy testing can determine whether house dust mites trigger your respiratory or dermatological symptoms. See your doctor for further information and advice.

If tests show that you are allergic to house dust mites, there are ways to reduce your immune system response. For example, you could undergo allergen immunotherapy, which involves deliberately exposing you to dust mite extracts to ‘train’ your immune system not to overreact.
Measures designed to reduce your household’s dust mite population may also be helpful.

**How to reduce the dust mites in your home**

It is impossible to destroy your entire dust mite population, but you can reduce their numbers. Allergic reactions are dose-related, so the fewer dust mites you have in your home, the less you may be troubled by respiratory or dermatological symptoms.

It is important to remember that the droppings of dead dust mites continue to provoke allergic reactions. You must not only reduce your dust mite population, but also take steps to remove their dead bodies and faeces from your home.

**Tips to reduce dust mites in your home**

Strategies include:

- Cover mattresses, pillows and quilts with dust mite resistant covers. The covers must be washed every two months. Some health funds may provide a rebate for these items.
- Wash sheets and pillowcases weekly in water hotter than 55°C. Alternatively, if washing in cold water, use a commercial product containing essential oils, such as eucalyptus or tea tree oil.
- Hot tumble dry (for half an hour after dry) or dry clean household items – this will kill house dust mites, but not the allergen they produce.
- Wash blankets and non-encased doonas every two months.
- Use synthetic rather than feather pillows and doonas, as these tolerate regular washing.
- Remove sheepskin or woollen underlays and any other sheepskin products.
- Remove all soft toys from the bedroom and replace with wooden or plastic toys, which can be washed. Or, if a soft toy is allowed, it should be washed weekly using the same method used for sheets. (Freezing soft toys overnight doesn’t work, because it doesn’t remove the allergen.)
- Dust dust or use electrostatic cloths to clean hard surfaces weekly, rather than a feather duster.
- Reduce humidity – have a dry and well-ventilated house. Have adequate floor and wall insulation and avoid evaporative coolers.
- Avoid upholstered furniture – leather, vinyl, plastic and wood are best.
- Avoid heavy curtains – Venetian blinds or flat blinds are better. Washable curtains or external shutters are other options.
- Wash clothing before use if it has been stored for a long time.
- Remove carpets, rugs and mats (where practical and affordable) – bare boards and tiled floors are preferable as they can be damp mopped or cleaned with electrostatic cloths.
- Wash rugs and mats regularly and dry them outside in full sunshine (if possible).
- Vacuum weekly, including the seams of mattresses and upholstered furniture. Vacuuming causes house dust mite allergens to become airborne for up to 20 minutes, so if you are allergic to dust mites, you should wear a mask or ask someone else to vacuum. You may air the house for an hour or so after vacuum cleaning to help clear the air.

**Dubious dust mite treatments**

Some treatments that claim to reduce dust mite populations have little or no benefit, including:

- chemical sprays
- air filters
- electric blankets
- negative ion generators
- allergen-free products.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Asthma Foundation Victoria (Asthma Australia). Tel. 1800 645 130
- Allergy & Anaphylaxis Australia. 1300 728 000

**References**

- Allergen minimisation, Australasian Society of Clinical Immunology and Allergy. More information here.

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More information

Allergies

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Allergy basics
- Allergic reactions
- Allergens and triggers
- Food allergies and intolerance
- Living with allergies

Allergy basics

- Allergic reactions emergency first aid
Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) and asthma attacks need urgent emergency first aid. In an emergency, always call triple zero (000).

- **Allergies explained**
  Allergy occurs when the body overreacts to a 'trigger' that is harmless to most people.

- **Allergy testing**
  Allergy testing is used to find which substances provoke an allergic reaction.

- **Asthma and allergens**
  Many people with asthma find their symptoms can worsen when they are exposed to certain allergens like house dust mite, animal dander, pollen and mould.

- **Immune system explained**
  The immune system remembers every germ it has ever overcome.

### Allergic reactions

- **Anaphylaxis**
  Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that requires urgent medical attention.

- **Eczema (atopic dermatitis)**
  Eczema can vary in severity, and symptoms may flare up or subside from day to day.

- **Hay fever**
  Hay fever is an allergic reaction to airborne allergens that can occur at any time of the year.

- **Hives**
  Hives (urticaria) is a reaction to the release of histamine into the skin.

- **Thunderstorm asthma - Mohamed Barre (video)**

### Allergens and triggers

- **Allergies to bites and stings**
  Allergies to insect stings and bites range from milder allergic reactions to life-threatening, severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis).

- **Aspergillus**
  Aspergillus is a fungus that commonly grows on rotting vegetation. It can cause asthma symptoms.

- **Avoiding asthma triggers**
  Asthma triggers are substances, conditions or activities that lead to symptoms of asthma. Asthma symptoms include difficulty breathing, coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. These symptoms can ...

- **Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma**
  People who have asthma or hay fever can get severe asthma symptoms during pollen season when high grass pollen counts combine with a certain type of thunderstorm.

- **House dust mite**
  Areas around the home that are heavily used, such as beds and upholstered furniture, will have much higher mite populations than the rest of the house.

- **Latex allergy**
  The best way to manage latex allergy is to avoid exposure to latex products.

- **Mould and your health**
  The way to control indoor mould growth is to control the source of moisture.

- **Thunderstorm asthma - Mohamed Barre (video)**

### Food allergies and intolerance

- **Coeliac disease and gluten sensitivity**
  Coeliac disease is an immune disease caused by gluten.

- **Cow’s milk allergy**

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Milk allergy symptoms range from mild to a life-threatening severe allergic reaction. Avoid food containing milk only under strict medical supervision.

- Egg allergy
  Egg allergy is one of the most common causes of allergies in children with symptoms ranging from mild to life-threatening reactions.

- Food additives
  The long-term effects of consuming a combination of different additives in our food are currently unknown.

- Food allergy and intolerance
  Food allergy is an immune response, while food intolerance is a chemical reaction.

- Gluten-free diet
  Gluten sensitivity can be managed with a gluten-free diet.

- Have you had an allergic reaction to packaged food?
  The Food Standards Code requires that certain foods must be listed on the package of a food, or made known to the customer upon request. If you experience an allergic reaction to a known allergen not...

- Lactose intolerance
  Symptoms of lactose intolerance include bloating, gas, abdominal pain and diarrhoea.

- Nut allergies
  Peanuts, tree nuts and seeds can all cause allergies with symptoms ranging from milder reactions to a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

- Raw (unpasteurised) milk
  Raw milk is milk that has not been pasteurised to kill bacteria that could be harmful to humans.

Living with allergies

- Allergic reactions emergency first aid
  Severe allergic reactions (anaphylaxis) and asthma attacks need urgent emergency first aid. In an emergency, always call triple zero (000).

- Asthma-friendly home
  There are many ways in which you can transform your home into an asthma-friendly environment.

- Travelling with an allergy
  If you have an allergy, visit your doctor before you travel, especially if you are at risk of a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) or an asthma attack.

Related Information

- Epidemic Thunderstorm Asthma
  People who have asthma or hay fever can get severe asthma symptoms during pollen season when high grass pollen counts combine with a certain type of thunderstorm.

- Asthma explained
  Asthma cannot be cured, but with good management people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

- Asthma management
  An asthma action plan can help you take control of your asthma and feel confident managing it.

- Asthma-friendly home
  There are many ways in which you can transform your home into an asthma-friendly environment.

- Avoiding asthma triggers
  Asthma triggers are substances, conditions or activities that lead to symptoms of asthma. Asthma symptoms include difficulty breathing, coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. These symptoms can...

Homes

Related information on other websites

- University of Sydney and Westmead Hospital - Dust Mite.

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