

## Living with asthma



An English man's home is his castle – so the saying goes. But what if your home is also a contributory factor to your ill health? We've all heard of sick building syndrome but generally associate this with no natural lighting in office blocks and air conditioning that circulates the multitude of bugs around the whole office. With one in six people in the UK suffering from an allergy of some kind – a number which is on the increase – it's time for us to look around us and manage the environment that is within our control – an environment that is much closer to home. Our home itself. Asthma is a good example. Asthma conjures up a mental image of wheezing – yet wheezing is only a by-product of this chronic lung disease. Inflammation is where the main focus lies. Treating asthma with drugs when it gets to the wheezing stage is like being flown by helicopter to the top of a mountain and claiming to have scaled the highest peaks – the real journey is far more involved.

Asthma is caused by an allergic reaction to an inappropriate immune response to harmless matter in the environment. Exposure to these substances poses no threat to the body, and so immune systems are usually able to deal with them imperceptibly. In some people, though, the system can become hypersensitive to one or more foreign proteins, known as allergens, causing it to overreact whenever that allergen is encountered. In this way, an allergy is like a 'phobia' of the immune system.

The consequence of this type of overreaction is a cascade of immune substances being overproduced, resulting in excessive amounts of histamine being released in the local area. It is this that is responsible for the symptoms commonly associated with allergies: the characteristic itchy eyes and runny nose of hay fever, the wheezing and coughing experienced by asthmatics and people allergic to animal dander, and so on.

### Are allergies on the increase?

One in six people in the UK suffer from an allergy of some kind, costing the NHS and Department of Health in excess of £750 million per year. The numbers are on the increase; as yet, no one is quite sure why.

Think of an allergic reaction and asthma is sure to be in the top 10. Think of one word that is most frequently associated with asthma and that would be wheezing. Asthma is in fact a chronic lung disease and wheezing is just the tip of the

iceberg. Inflammation is the root of the problem and this can be treated in a variety of ways that don't just include medication - preventative medicine is astoundingly important too.

## Management

Because asthma is a chronic disease the patient is crucial in its management. Unless it were possible to have a doctor on duty to you personally, 24 hours a day, the major part of managing asthma comes down to the patient. A study by Carter, Perznowski, Raymond and Platts-Mills (2001) found that simple forms of prevention are effective in improving asthma. With sufficient education and appropriate skills it is possible to take charge of asthma.

## Recommendations

- Avoidance of animal dander: removal of animal dander from living environment (feather cushions etc) and if you don't want to get rid of your pets - limitations on their territory i.e. no access to upholstered furniture anywhere in the house. No access to the bedroom.
- Dust mites. Covers to bedding to be washed weekly in hot water. Mattresses and pillows to be covered in allergen impermeable covers.
- Other indoor irritants. Reduce dust by avoiding wood burning stoves etc. Avoid strong smelling cleaning agents and perfumes. Avoid smoky environments.
- Outdoor irritants. Cold can trigger asthma and could be aided by breathing through a scarf when exercising in the cold.

Asthma triggers cannot be completely eradicated but it is easy to make positive steps to minimize them. Take a look around your home. If you have animals keep them out of the bedroom as their dander can be an irritant. Keep them off any upholstery in the rest of the house too.

Carpets harbour dust and mites so avoiding them within the home will also make a positive contribution towards avoiding asthma attacks. Humidity within the house, if kept between 40-50% can reduce exposure to dust mites.

**Humidifiers** work by drawing in dry air and filtering it through the wick where moisture is absorbed from the reservoir. This air is then directed back into your room to create a cleaner, healthier environment - calming your entire respiratory tract effortlessly.

The unit is carefully regulated and it even tells you how much water to add for maximum efficiency, running for 17 hours on just one half pint fill.

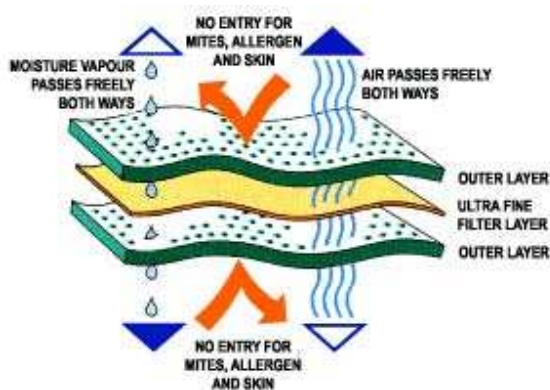




**Drying bags** work in environments where it is too damp - damp air tends to get trapped in nooks and crannies, drawers, wardrobes etc. This clever little item prevents allergens such as dust mites which thrive in damp conditions by absorbing moisture from the air and also protects clothes, papers, linen and anything else that needs dry conditions.



The greatest amount of time spent in one room will probably be your bedroom. Dust mites are prevalent in bedding and yet you can protect yourself from them with minimal effort. Medibed® produce **anti-allergy bedding** for your duvet, mattress and pillows providing an impenetrable shield against the house dust mite and its highly irritating waste material to provide a total block against the two million mites who share your bed in an average night. The fabric creates an impenetrable barrier not only against the mites but also to block out their highly irritating waste material. So the range is absolutely invaluable for anyone with dust mite allergies such as asthma, eczema and rhinitis.



### Personal Cost

Asthma needs to be taken seriously. At its most extreme it can kill. Anything that can be done to reduce the impact of asthma on your life is worth it, especially if this means there is more time to spend doing things you want to rather than, for example, sitting in the local doctor's surgery waiting for a repeat prescription. Rather than treating asthma as an episodic wheezing disease that requires emergency measures, such as steroids, it is possible to focus on prevention by minimizing the asthma triggers in the environment within which you live.

Notes:

Word count: 1062

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