

Test Your Allergy Smarts

Between spring-cleaning and all that pesky pollen in the air, this is an especially itchy-sniffly-sneezy time of year. Take our quiz to see if you're prepared to protect yourself from the many irritants that can make you miserable.

By KATE ROCKWOOD

1 ALLERGY SYMPTOMS HAVE BEEN LINKED TO...

- A Type 2 diabetes
- B Migraines
- C Osteoporosis
- D Infertility

ANSWER: B. People with allergy symptoms are 30 percent more likely to get migraines—and their headaches may be more frequent and intense than those experienced by migraine sufferers without the sniffles. Experts aren't sure exactly why, though the connection may have to do with the main sensory nerve in the face, the trigeminal nerve. But there is hope: Research suggests that allergy shots can reduce the frequency and intensity of migraines by 50 percent.

2 TRUE OR FALSE: YOUR WASHING MACHINE PROBABLY HAS MOLD.

ANSWER: True. The warm, dark interior of your machine is the perfect breeding ground for fungi, not to mention bacteria like *E. coli*, and detergent doesn't do much to deter them. "I tell my patients to wipe down the machine's drum, and particularly the door and rubber gasket, with diluted bleach or bleach wipes twice a month, or to use a cleaning tablet, like Affresh," says allergist Neeta Ogden, MD. Other habits that can prevent mold growth: Remove wet clothes from the machine promptly, and leave the door open between loads so the drum and door can dry.

Feather dusters: for Halloween costumes only.



4 True or false: It's best to bust out the feather duster at least once a week.

ANSWER: False. You should dust every week, but using a feather duster or dry rag is worse than not dusting at all. "It stirs more dust into the air than it traps," explains Dr. Corn. "A wet cloth or even a wet paper towel is better because it actually picks up the dust"—which is vital for anyone suffering from allergies or asthma, not just those sensitive to dust mites. That's because household dust is full of lots of other irritating stuff, including pet dander, mold spores and fabric fibers. When it comes time for the chore, wear a face mask and gloves, or just wash your hands thoroughly after you've finished.

3 Which allergies can be prevented with immunotherapy pills?



A
Grass



B
Dust mites



C
Ragweed



D
Birch tree



E
Mold

ANSWER: A and C. Two years ago, the FDA approved the first sublingual pills for grass and ragweed allergies. (A pill for dust allergy may be coming soon.) But before you open up and say aah, consider this: If you're allergic to, for example, mold or oak in addition to grass or ragweed, the pills may not be right for you. "They're really for someone who's sensitized to just one allergen—and a lot of people aren't," explains Beth Corn, MD, associate professor of clinical immunology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. On the other hand, she adds, "allergy shots can address multiple allergens at once."



Skip the sunrise run if you're an allergy sufferer.

6 When should you exercise outside?

- A** Early in the morning
- B** When it's windy out
- C** After a rainstorm
- D** In the evening

5 CHOOSE THE SMARTEST STRATEGY FOR SNIFFLE-FREE SLEEP.

- A** Wash your pillow every three months.
- B** Replace your pillow yearly.
- C** Use a pillow cover under your pillowcase.

ANSWER: C. Dust mites are one of the most common causes of year-round allergies, and given their favorite food—skin cells shed by humans and pets—it's no surprise that they thrive in beds. (Blech!) To fight back, allergists advise getting allergenproof encasings for pillows, as well as for comforters, mattresses and box springs. A 2002 study showed that these covers can significantly reduce dust mites. (Experts recommend ones made from very tightly woven microfiber.) "The case eliminates the need to wash the pillow itself," which can lead to mold growth, says Jeffrey May, a certified indoor air-quality professional and author of *My House Is Killing Me!* And you won't have to replace your pillow every year; sleep on it until it's no longer comfy.

ANSWER: C and D. While different types of pollen peak at different times of the day, morning is almost universally miserable—so the allergy-prone should postpone sweat sessions until the later hours. Before you lace up, check the pollen count at aaaai.org, the site of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. "If it's a high pollen day, you're better off doing your workout indoors, no matter what time it is," says Dr. Ogden. Forget blustery days: Wind raises the concentration of allergens in the air. In an ideal scenario, you'd head out just after showers have passed through, because rain washes pollen away.

8 WHICH ITEMS SHOULD YOU THROW IN THE WASH AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH?

- A** Curtains
- B** Throw pillows
- C** Area rugs
- D** Shower curtains
- E** All of the above

ANSWER: E. We know, we know: So. Much. Laundry. But hot water is the best way to remove allergens that would otherwise turn you into a runny-nosed mess. Researchers in South Korea determined that 140 degrees is the ideal temp for a wash, killing off 100 percent of dust mites; water that was 104 degrees destroyed just 9.6 percent of the microscopic buggers. The hotter water was also better at removing pollen. The sanitize setting, or whatever is hottest on your machine, is typically toasty enough. If you want to cut back on trips to the laundry room, consider swapping curtains for blinds (that you dust regularly) and ditching the area rugs.

9 BAGLESS VACUUM—OR BAGGED?



- Bagless
- Bagged

ANSWER: Bagged. You already know that a HEPA (high-efficiency particulate arrestance) filter is nonnegotiable because it sucks up and traps the teeniest particles that have settled into your rugs, floors and furniture. "But even with a HEPA, it's a mistake to go bagless," says May. "When you empty the contents of the canister, you inhale dust." Not ready to ditch your bagless machine? Empty the canister outside. Like feather dusting, this is a task where a face mask and gloves (or a spouse or roommate willing to do it for you) can come in handy. No matter what kind of vacuum you use, scrubbing it down should be on your spring-cleaning list. Use a damp cloth to wipe the canister, and remove any visible debris from the brushes and filter. Keep an eye out for cracks or air gaps around the filter, which are signs it needs to be repaired or replaced.



7 Pick the pet that's 100 percent hypoallergenic.



A
Poodle



B
Cockatoo



C
Fish



D
Short-haired cat



E
Robot

ANSWER: E. There's really no such thing as a completely hypoallergenic animal, since different people react to different things, says Dr. Ogden, who is also a spokesperson for the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology. For example, someone allergic to mold might be bothered by a fish tank, which can harbor fungal spores. And people who struggle with dander will likely have trouble with any dog or cat. "The allergic reaction is triggered by proteins in the animal's saliva and skin, regardless of how much hair it has," explains Dr. Ogden. (Indeed, a study in the *American Journal of Rhinology & Allergy* found essentially the same amount of dander in homes with "hypoallergenic" dogs as in homes with other breeds.) Not even birds are safe for the dander-sensitive, because they produce feather dust, known as bird dander. But if pollen is your problem and you're desperate for a dog, go with a short-haired breed. When your pup is outside, fewer grains will get trapped in his coat and tracked inside.

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10
Choose the houseplant that's most likely to trigger hay fever.



A Artificial plant



B Corn plant



C Ficus



D Hibiscus

ANSWER: C. Researchers in Belgium found that 78 percent of allergy sufferers with plants at home were allergic to at least one, most frequently ficus. But fake plants aren't the only alternative. Many flowering kinds, like hibiscus, produce little to no airborne pollen, so they shouldn't set off symptoms. And NASA research has suggested that some houseplants, like the corn plant (aka mass cane), may scrub air of contaminants such as formaldehyde—"an irritant that can make you more sensitive to allergens," says Dr. Ogden. Plants may even remove particles from the air: One study showed that in a small office, they reduced dust by up to 20 percent!



For fewer sniffles, wash hands after petting Fluffy and before bed.

How to Beat Allergens in the Bedroom

Consider these habits part of your sleep hygiene routine.

Declutter

▶ All those books and knickknacks are dust magnets; move them to other rooms. Skip throw pillows, too; not only are they dust mite paradise, they're often tossed on the floor (getting even dustier).

Enforce a no-pet policy

▶ Kicking Miss Snugglepaws out of your bed won't completely eliminate the amount of dander that makes its way into the bedroom, but it will help.

Vacuum—like, a lot

▶ Carpets are killer for people with allergies. If you can't replace your carpets with washable area rugs, take a spin around the floor with your HEPA vacuum at least once a week.

Dry your hair before bed

▶ Falling asleep with damp tresses can encourage mites and mold in your pillow. If you're not a fan of the blow-dryer, it may be worth bumping your bath or shower earlier.

11 When spring-cleaning your closet this year, which step can you skip?

- | | | | | |
|--|---|--|-----------------------------------|---|
| A
Vacuuming along the baseboards | B
Getting rid of items you haven't worn in a year | C
Relocating your hamper to another spot | D
Opening the air vents | E
Shifting items away from any exterior walls |
|--|---|--|-----------------------------------|---|

ANSWER: B. "You would not believe the number of allergens I find in closets," says May, who has taken air and dust samples from hundreds of them. One common culprit: hamper. Every time you toss in a dirty shirt or pair of socks, you could spread pollen and dander to your clean clothes. Then there's the dust that collects beneath shoe racks and behind storage bins. May advises emptying the closet at least once a year and giving it a thorough cleaning. As you put stuff back, leave space in front of any wall between the inside and outside of the house. "When it's cold outside and humid in the house, water condenses along the walls, and you can get mold," he explains. Springtime (and rising temps) can mean more humidity indoors, which is great news for dust mites and terrible news for your nose. Check that closet vents are open so conditioned air and heat can circulate.



SO HOW'D YOU DO?

IF YOU GOT...

1 TO 4 CORRECT: ACHOO! PASS THE TISSUES

Yes, carefully dusting and vacuuming is a drag, and no one wants to move her morning run indoors. But some changes are so worth it. Take a few smart steps to ward off allergens this season and you'll breathe a whole lot easier.

5 TO 8 CORRECT: YOU'VE GOT NASAL KNOW-HOW

You can spot most things that make your allergies flare up, but you're still learning new strategies. Remember that sometimes the smallest tweaks (bye-bye, feather duster!) can mean the biggest improvements.

9 TO 11 CORRECT: ALLERGY ALL-STAR

Friends might not even realize you have allergies, because you've got avoidance and treatment down pat. Give yourself a high five, and go on rocking those habits that will keep you feeling good.